NEW

FOOTBALL ALL-STARS

STAR STRIKERS

8 AMAZING POSTERS INSIDE

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE BEAUTIFUL GAME'S GREATEST PLAYERS

MIDFIELD MAESTROS

WING WIZARDS

Digital Edition



FIRST EDITION

HENRY • DE BRUYNE • RONALDINHO • KANE • HEGERBERG • XAVI • PELÉ & MORE

WELCOME

With an estimated 3.5 billion fans worldwide, football (or soccer) is undoubtedly the most popular sport on the planet. Nothing else comes close. And one of the reasons we love it so much? The superstars who have graced pitches all around the globe, from Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro to London, Paris, Madrid and beyond – the players who get us off our seats and entertain and excite us every time they pull on their shirts and lace up their boots; the ones who remind us why we fell in love with the beautiful game in the first place. We worship them, we wear their names on our backs and, when we take to the pitch, we try to be them.

In Football All-Stars we celebrate the greatest players the world has ever seen, from the midfield maestros who make their teams tick to the dogged defenders who will do anything to protect their goals, from the star strikers whose job it is to score the goals to the goalkeepers who make it their mission to keep them out. Turn the page to discover the fascinating stories of legends from the past, such as Diego Maradona and Johan Cruyff, as well as today's current stars, including Jude Bellingham, Kylian Mbappé, Lionel Messi and many more. And that's not all – we've also got eight eye-catching posters of your favourite football heroes inside!

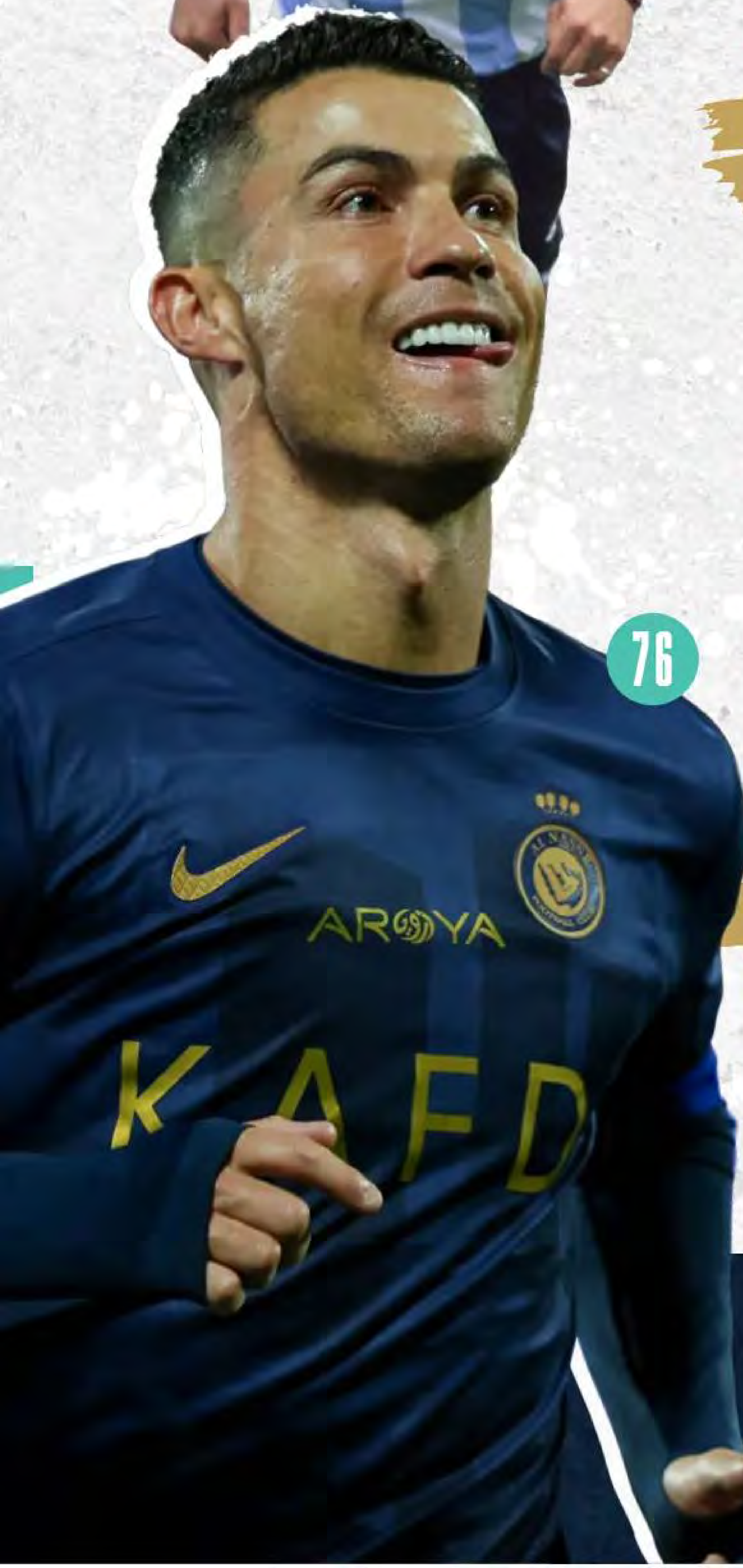
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Images Getty

FUN FACT
Bellingham's dad, Mark, scored an incredible 700 career goals in non-professional football.

JUDE BELLING

From Birmingham to the Bernabéu, Bellingham's living the dream and still got the world at his feet

He arrived at the club he's always supported to become a local hero, he went to Germany to play with superstars and now he's one of the best players in the world at Real Madrid. Jude Bellingham's career mirrors something from an EA Sports game: and it's only just beginning.

Few expected Bellingham to have such an impact at Real Madrid but at the age of just 20, he's become their talisman, taking Zinedine Zidane's iconic No.5 shirt and scoring for fun in the Bernabéu. With a trademark celebration – arms wide out, gazing at his adoring fans – the England international has established himself as a superstar who can do it all in midfield: win possession, drive up the pitch and most importantly, score bucketloads of goals.

The sky's the limit for what he can achieve. And with 29 international caps before the age of 21, England fans expect him to become the next Lion to win the Ballon d'Or.

HAM



BIO

Date of birth: 29 June 2003
Birthplace: Stourbridge, England
Nationality: English
Height: 1.86m (6'1")
Position: Midfielder
Teams: Birmingham City (2019-20), Borussia Dortmund (2020-23), Real Madrid (2023-present)
Number: 5



MAJOR HONOURS

1x La Liga

1x German Cup



STATS & RECORDS

2 – most times a teenager has been to a major tournament with England

17 YEARS AND 349 DAYS – youngest England player at a Euros

14 – most goals scored in a player's first 15 games for Real Madrid

Images Getty

22

MORE THAN A NUMBER

When Birmingham City sold Bellingham to Borussia Dortmund in 2020, the Blues decided that no one else would ever wear his No.22 shirt, saying, “It would be fitting to retire this number, to remember one of our own and to inspire others”. While it looked a little strange at the time, Bellingham’s well on his way to becoming a legend of the game – and maybe Birmingham recognised that first.

FUN FACT

Bellingham wore No.22, as it combined other midfield shirt numbers, 4, 8 and 10.

GERMAN EXCURSION

Teaming up with the likes of Jadon Sancho and Erling Haaland at Borussia Dortmund, Bellingham rose to become one of the most exciting players in the world. BVB continually challenged Bayern Munich and perhaps they would have won the title on the last day of the 2022-23 season, had Bellingham not been injured. As it was, Bayern triumphed... and Jude never got his Bundesliga medal before heading off to Real Madrid.



A TRUE GALACTICO

Could there have been more pressure on Bellingham’s shoulders? He joined Real Madrid for over €100 million and inherited Zinedine Zidane’s No.5 shirt – but the midfielder became an instant hit at the Bernabéu, scoring late winners and celebrating with that trademark pose. It takes a special player to take Los Blancos by storm and Bellingham has smashed records from midfield to lead Carlo Ancelotti’s side... at just the age of 20.



"IT WOULD BE FITTING TO RETIRE THIS NUMBER, TO REMEMBER ONE OF OUR OWN AND TO INSPIRE OTHERS"

YOUNG LION

Bellingham became the third-youngest England player ever when he made his debut, soon establishing himself as one of the Three Lions' most important players and one of the first on Gareth Southgate's team-sheet. As a regular starter in Qatar, he was one of the most exciting players to watch at his first World Cup – and he's just getting started.

FUN FACT

Bellingham was voted the La Liga Player of the Season in his first year in Spain.

Images Getty

PAOLO MALDINI

The legendary defender was a mainstay of one of Europe's greatest clubs

The inheritor of a footballing legacy, Paolo Maldini managed to raise the bar even higher, standing out as not only one of AC Milan and Italy's greatest ever players, but one of the world's best. Virtually ever-present as assorted other stars came and went, for the best part of 25 years his elegance, skill and composure marked him out as one that forwards feared to come up against, and teammates counted themselves blessed to play alongside.

Maldini was renowned not only for his defensive ability, but for the way he redefined defending as something elegant. You wouldn't see many last-ditch challenges from him, simply because he read the game so well that he rarely put himself in a situation where he had to make them. He gained prominence under Arrigo Sacchi's famous 'Immortals', forming a near-impenetrable back line alongside the likes of Franco Baresi, Alessandro Costacurta and Mauro Tassotti. From here, he hoovered up numerous honours and accolades across 25 years, leaving a legacy for club and country that is unlikely to ever be bettered.



THE FINAL CHAMPIONS LEAGUE VICTORY

Part of the side that so famously slipped up against Liverpool in 2005, the rematch two years later didn't follow the same script. Milan ran out 2-1 winners, with Maldini rolling back the years at the age of 36 in what was to be his fifth and final Champions League trophy.



MALDINI

PAOLO MALDINI



BIO

Date of birth: 26 June 1968
Birthplace: Milan, Italy
Nationality: Italian
Height: 1.86m (6'1")
Position: Defender
Team: AC Milan (1984-2009)
Number: 3



MAJOR HONOURS

7x Serie A

1x Coppa Italia

5x UEFA Champions League



STATS & RECORDS

26 – the number of trophies won with AC Milan

902 – appearances made for AC Milan, a club record

25 – number of years played for AC Milan

FUN FACT

His father, Cesare, also played for and captained both AC Milan and Italy.

Images Getty; Alamy



LIONEL MESSI

Against all the odds, a tiny Argentine became the greatest of all time – and inspired millions

FUN FACT

Messi's trademark celebration of pointing at the sky is a tribute to his late grandmother.



ABOVE Messi was one-third of Barcelona's 'MSN' – and alongside Luis Suárez and Neymar, the trio might be the greatest attack ever

Some thought he was far too small to ever become a footballer: in the end, he may well have become the greatest of them all.

Lionel Messi has become a legend of the game for his superhuman abilities to dribble, score and pass like no one else on Earth, breaking just about every record ever set. It was at Barcelona that he was given an opportunity as a youngster to shine alongside Ronaldinho, before replacing him as the Catalans' talisman and becoming a leader who dragged them to trophy after trophy. In 2022, in his twilight years, Messi became a World Cup winner, asserting himself as one of the most beloved players of all time, who gave countless moments of genius to his public.

Whether holding his shirt in celebration against Real Madrid or running the length of the pitch against Getafe, everyone has their favourite Messi memory.

BIO

Date of birth: 24 June 1987
Birthplace: Rosario, Argentina
Nationality: Argentine
Height: 1.7m (5'7")
Position: Forward
Teams: Barcelona (2004-21), Paris Saint-Germain (2021-23), Inter Miami (2023-present)
Number: 10

MAJOR HONOURS

10x La Liga
1x Leagues Cup
7x Copa del Rey
1x FIFA World Cup
4x UEFA Champions League
1x Copa América
2x Ligue 1
8x Ballon d'Or

STATS & RECORDS

8 – most Ballon d'Or awards of any player ever

2 – most Golden Ball awards at World Cups of any player

672 – most goals at a club in Europe's top five leagues

Images Getty

91, NOT OUT

Messi simply couldn't stop scoring in 2012. The Argentine ended the year with a grand total of 91 goals in all competitions for club and country, beating Gerd Müller's long-standing record of 85, 40 years prior. Some say this was Messi's peak level while at Barcelona – will we ever see anyone else have a calendar year quite like this one again?





HEAD OF GOD

Messi's first taste of Champions League glory came in 2009, when he scored against Manchester United in Rome to become a European champion. While some will say Cristiano Ronaldo was always a better header of the ball, Messi's goal in this final came with his head – against Ronaldo on the opposite team – as Barcelona clinched one of six trophies that year under Pep Guardiola.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

With his move from Paris Saint-Germain to Inter Miami, Messi became the biggest player in Major League Soccer at the age of 36. He would score just minutes into his career in Florida, too, coming on as a substitute in a Leagues Cup match to net the winner with a free-kick. Even club owner David Beckham was moved to tears, in a dream start for Messi over in the United States.



FUN FACT

Messi became Argentina's greatest player – but was sent off less than a minute into his debut.

FUN FACT
Messi has scored over 50 hat-tricks – his first came against Barça's rivals Real Madrid.



CHAMPION OF THE WORLD

Messi's Argentina career was defined by heartbreak for a long time, with the Flea losing two Copa América finals, in addition to a World Cup final in 2014. But then in 2022, Messi won the World Cup in Qatar, leading his team to a third world title as he rolled back the years to put in some timeless performances. Messi scored twice in the final and netted in the shootout against France.

Images Getty

ALISSON BECKER

Liverpool and Brazil's man between the sticks

Traditionally, Brazil isn't renowned for producing top-class goalkeepers, but in Alisson Becker they have one of the best in the world.

Since signing for Liverpool under Jürgen Klopp, he has been a cornerstone of the Merseyside club's success, his top-notch shot-stopping abilities, lightning-fast reflexes and utterly unflappable demeanour ensuring that he has won nearly every honour it is possible to attain at domestic level. His individual displays have been recognised via his numerous awards: two Premier League Golden Gloves, the 2019 Best FIFA Goalkeeper awards, and becoming a regular fixture in all manner of 'Team of the Year' awards.

He has been a similarly galvanising presence in a Brazil side lacking the on-field superstars of previous generations, generally being preferred as a starter over his Premier League rival, Manchester City's Ederson. As you will see from his stats, his record speaks for itself, and it's likely that he'll remain a stalwart for club and country for many years to come.



ON THE HEAD!

Goals scored by goalkeepers happen every so often, but this truly was a special one. With Liverpool level against stubborn opponents in the form of West Bromwich Albion, Becker let fly with a stunning header in injury time to seal the victory for the Merseysiders. It's a shame that since the country was in lockdown, there weren't any fans in the ground to witness it.

ALISSON

ALISSON BECKER



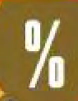
BIO

Date of birth: 2 October 1992
Birthplace: Novo Hamburgo, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.93m (6'3")
Position: Goalkeeper
Teams: Internacional (2013-16), Roma (2016-18), Liverpool (2018-present)
Number: 1



MAJOR HONOURS

1x Premier League
1x FA Cup
1x UEFA Champions League
1x Copa América



STATS & RECORDS

74.4% – career save percentage to date

100 – clean sheets for Liverpool in first 229 games

21 – most Premier League clean sheets for Liverpool in a season

FUN FACT

Becker cost Liverpool £66.8 million when they signed him from Roma – a then-world record for a goalkeeper.

Images Getty

SON HEUNG-MIN

One of the greatest Asian footballers of all time, Son is one of the Premier League's shining lights

Even before he joined Tottenham Hotspur, Son Heung-Min was an icon in his native South Korea. While its best players generally leave their country early in order to ply their trade in Europe, few have reached the level of acclaim that Son has managed to achieve over the years.

A success in Germany for both Hamburger SV and Bayer Leverkusen thanks to his speed, agility and utterly relentless dedication both on and off the pitch, he has gone from strength to strength since moving to the Premier League. Despite playing in the same side as Harry Kane for the majority of his time at Spurs, his goalscoring record is impressive, with 160 goals in 402 games. He is now captain for both club and country, where he is honoured not just as one of their most successful sporting exports, but also as a source of national pride.

SON

SON HEUNG-MIN



13-MINUTE HAT-TRICK

Some players would sulk after being dropped to the bench. Son isn't one of those. After being brought on in the 59th minute of Tottenham's 2022 home tie against Leicester, he quickly set about proving his manager wrong by netting a quickfire hat-trick as Spurs demolished their opponents 6-2. Write off Son at your peril.



BIO

Date of birth: 8 July 1992
Birthplace: Chuncheon, South Korea
Nationality: South Korean
Height: 1.84m (6'0")
Position: Forward
Teams: Hamburger SV (2010-13), Bayer Leverkusen (2013-15), Tottenham Hotspur (2015-present)
Number: 7



MAJOR HONOURS

N/A



STATS & RECORDS

34KM/H – Son's instantaneous maximum speed

23 – PL goals scored in 2021-22, making him the first Asian player to win the Golden Boot

7 – South Korean Player of the Year awards won

FUN FACT

Son was awarded an exemption from military service, which is normally required in South Korea.

Images Getty

TOP 10 MANAGERS

Meet the game changers who won trophies without ever kicking a ball for their successful sides

Some football managers are supreme strategists. Others are master motivators. A handful changed the game by introducing pioneering tactics that left opponents bamboozled. Whether they're tracksuit coaches at their best on the training pitch or slick thinkers in a smart suit, this shortlist of top bosses have introduced us to Total Football, the Busby Babes and Grande Inter.



ALEX FERGUSON

NATIONALITY Scottish
ACTIVE 1974-2013
TEAMS East Stirlingshire, St Mirren, Aberdeen, Scotland, Manchester United
MAJOR HONOURS 2x UEFA Champions League, 13x Premier League, 5x FA Cup, 3x Scottish Premier Division, 4x Scottish Cup

Ferguson has won more top-flight trophies than any other manager in world football. The majority came in a 26-year stint with Manchester United in which the Red Devils won 13 league titles, but he also led Aberdeen when they broke the Old Firm's domination in Scotland and took charge of Scotland at the 1986 World Cup.



BILL SHANKLY

NATIONALITY Scottish
ACTIVE 1949-74
TEAMS Carlisle United, Grimsby Town, Workington, Huddersfield Town, Liverpool
MAJOR HONOURS 3x English First Division, 2x FA Cup, 1x UEFA Cup

Shankly took a Liverpool team with no real history of success and turned them into a powerhouse of football. Although his successors, Bob Paisley and Joe Fagan, may have won more trophies, it was Shankly who laid the foundations, taking Liverpool from the Second Division and pioneering the club's signature patient, passing.

ERNST HAPPEL

NATIONALITY Austrian
ACTIVE 1962-92
TEAMS ADO Den Haag, San Francisco Golden Gate Gales, Feyenoord, Sevilla, Club Brugge, Netherlands, Harelbeke, Standard Liège, Hamburg, Swarovski Tirol, Austria
MAJOR HONOURS 2x European Cup, 1x Eredivisie, 1x Dutch Cup, 3x Belgian Pro League, 2x Belgian Cup, 2x Bundesliga, 1x German Cup, 2x Austrian Bundesliga, 1x Austrian Cup

Many managers enjoy success with one particular club, but Happel won trophies at almost every stop of his managerial career. He won the league and cup in the Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany and Austria, and won the European Cup with two different clubs: Feyenoord in 1970 and Hamburg in 1983.



RINUS MICHELS

NATIONALITY Dutch
ACTIVE 1953-92
TEAMS Ajax, Barcelona, Netherlands, Los Angeles Aztecs, FC Köln, Bayer Leverkusen
MAJOR HONOURS
1x European Cup, 4x Eredivisie, 3x Dutch Cup, 1x La Liga, 1x Copa del Rey, 1x German Cup, 1x European Championship

Michels developed a set of tactics known as Total Football while manager of Ajax, encouraging each player to range across the field in search of free space. He used the same philosophy during four separate periods as Netherlands manager, during which his country were World Cup runners-up in 1974 and European Champions in 1988.



MATT BUSBY



NATIONALITY Scottish
ACTIVE 1945-71
TEAMS Manchester United, Scotland
MAJOR HONOURS 1x European Cup, 5x English First Division, 2x FA Cup

Busby's Manchester United team of the late 1950s won successive league titles before it was catastrophically ripped apart in the Munich air disaster. Busby himself nearly died, but survived to rebuild United and win another two league titles and claim the trophy that his side were pursuing before the tragic crash: the European Cup.

HELENIO HERRERA



NATIONALITY Argentinian
ACTIVE 1945-81
TEAMS Real Valladolid, Atlético Madrid, Málaga, Deportivo La Coruña, Sevilla, Belenenses, Barcelona, Spain, Inter Milan, Italy, Roma, Rimini
MAJOR HONOURS 2x European Cup, 4x La Liga, 2x Copa del Rey, 3x Serie A, 1x Coppa Italia

Perhaps the first manager to receive credit for his team's success, it was in Milan that he changed the face of football by employing a sweeper behind two centre-backs. Grande Inter, as Herrera's team became known, won back-to-back European Cups.

BRIAN CLOUGH



NATIONALITY English
ACTIVE 1965-93
TEAMS Hartlepool United, Derby County, Brighton & Hove Albion, Leeds United, Nottingham Forest
MAJOR HONOURS 2x European Cup, 2x English First Division

No-nonsense Clough took two Second Division clubs – Derby County and Nottingham Forest – and won the league title with both. Forest also became back-to-back champions of Europe playing the patient, passing game Clough favoured. Despite wanting to lead his country, the FA never dared appoint outspoken Clough.

PEP GUARDIOLA



NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 2008-present
TEAMS Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Manchester City
MAJOR HONOURS 3x UEFA Champions League, 3x La Liga, 2x Copa del Rey, 3x Bundesliga, 2x German Cup, 6x Premier League, 2x FA Cup

Guardiola has managed three of Europe's great clubs, but even so, he's been a record breaker. His four years with Barça saw him win 14 trophies, he won two league and cup doubles in three years with Munich, and his Manchester City team became the first to attain 100 points in a top-flight season.

ARRIGO SACCHI



NATIONALITY Italian
ACTIVE 1973-2001
TEAMS Rimini, Parma, AC Milan, Italy, Atlético Madrid
MAJOR HONOURS 2x European Cup, 1x Serie A

Since he never played professional football himself, Sacchi had to work his way up through Italy's league system before getting his first shot as boss of a big club: AC Milan. He shifted Milan's tactics away from Italy's traditional sweeper system to an attacking 4-4-2 with a high defensive line, and won back-to-back European Cups in 1989 and 1990.

VALERIY LOBANOVSKYI



NATIONALITY USSR/Ukrainian
ACTIVE 1969-2001
TEAMS Dnipro Dnipropetrovsk, Dynamo Kiev, USSR, UAE, Kuwait, Ukraine
MAJOR HONOURS 2x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, 8x Soviet Top League

Lobanovskyi established Dynamo Kiev as the dominant club east of the Iron Curtain, and under him they became the first Soviet club to pick up a major European trophy. At a time when Soviet football was stuck in the past, Lobanovskyi adopted Total Football tactics.

Images Getty

FUN FACT
Barcelona and Inter Milan both broke the world transfer record to sign Ronaldo in consecutive seasons.

RONALDO

At his peak perhaps the deadliest goalscorer in history, O Fenômeno is still held as the gold standard for strikers

If you were building the perfect striker from scratch, they'd look a lot like Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima. The Phenomenon, as he came to be known, arrived on the scene as a devastating attacking force, with Cruzeiro, then PSV, Barcelona and Brazil – all lightning bursts of pace, bewildering changes of direction and violent finishes that left goalkeepers grasping at air. After a dominant season in Spain, Ronaldo moved to Inter and tore up Serie A just as he'd done La Liga. But then the injuries hit, in particular a devastating kneecap 'explosion' that would alter his career forever. Ronaldo would recover, eventually, and begin a thrilling second act with the national team and as one of Real Madrid's Galácticos. There, he showed his touch and goalscoring instincts hadn't dulled, though the memories of those early years still have fans asking what might have been if he'd stayed fully fit.

ONE YEAR AT BARÇA

Ronaldo played fewer than 50 games for Barcelona, but the brilliance of his time there has become the stuff of legend. Still a teenager when he signed, he adapted to La Liga with ease and instantly began terrorising defenders across Spain. He won Spain's Pichichi Trophy with 34 league goals, scored the winner in the Cup Winners' Cup final and secured the Copa del Rey before departing for Inter.



BIO

Date of birth: 18 September 1976
Birthplace: Itaguaí, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.83m (6'0")
Position: Forward
Teams: Cruzeiro (1993-94), PSV (1994-96), Barcelona (1996-97), Inter Milan (1997-2002), Real Madrid (2002-07), AC Milan (2007-08), Corinthians (2009-11)
Number: 9

MAJOR HONOURS

- 2x FIFA World Cup
- 1x La Liga
- 1x UEFA Cup
- 1x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup
- 2x Copa América
- 2x Ballon d'Or
- 1x Copa del Rey
- 1x Dutch Cup

STATS & RECORDS

15 – FIFA World Cup goals (the second of all-time)

21 YEARS 96 DAYS – youngest Ballon d'Or winner

0.67 – career goals per game

Images Getty

FUN FACT

Ronaldo was given a farewell appearance for Brazil in a friendly against Romania, four months after officially retiring.

CRISIS IN FRANCE

When the team sheets for the 1998 World Cup final were released, there was no Ronaldo among the Brazilian starters. Chaos ensued. Rumours swirled. Was he injured? Sick? Had he been poisoned? Allegedly, the striker suffered a convulsion in his sleep, but he arrived in time for kick-off and declared himself fit to play. The reinstated Ronaldo was a shadow of his usual self, however, and Brazil slumped to a 3-0 defeat against hosts France.



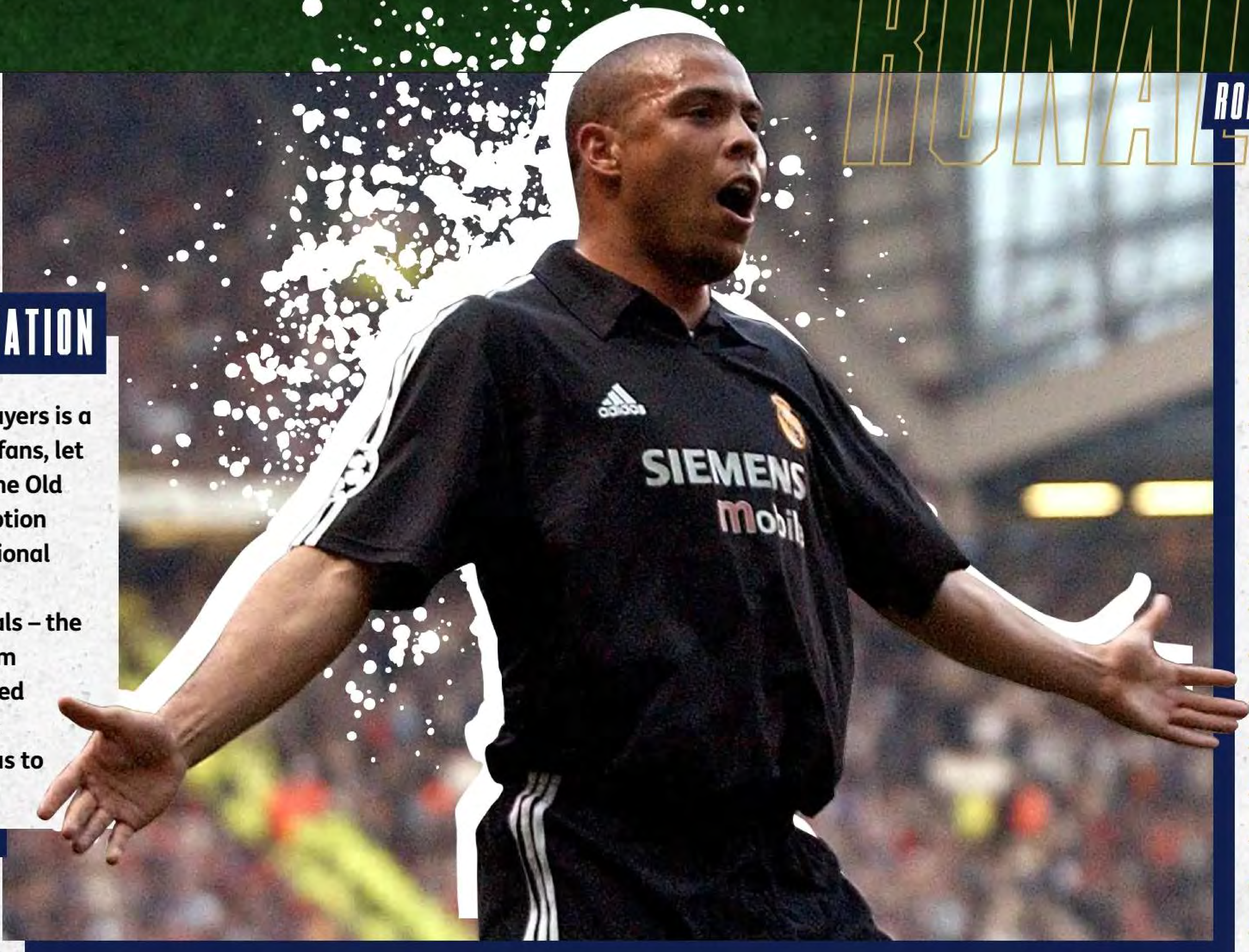
Above A prodigious talent from the get-go, Ronaldo arrived in Europe at PSV and immediately started to sparkle in the Eredivisie



RONALDO

AN OLD TRAFFORD OVATION

Any applause for opposition players is a rarity from Manchester United fans, let alone a standing ovation. But the Old Trafford faithful made an exception for Ronaldo in 2003. His sensational hat-trick for Real Madrid in the Champions League quarter-finals – the third a vicious, dipping shot from outside the penalty area – helped knock United out. But there are times when brilliance simply has to be acknowledged.



WORLD CUP REDEMPTION

Four years after the defeat in France, Ronaldo returned to the World Cup with a vengeance. At the tip of a fearsome attacking trio with Rivaldo and Ronaldinho, he was imperious as Brazil beat all comers en route to the final against Germany. This time there was no mystery illness. Ronaldo scored both goals in a 2-0 win to take the Golden Boot and cement his place among the greats.



FUN FACT

In 2018, Ronaldo became the majority owner of Spanish club Real Valladolid.

Images Getty

ANTOINE GRIEZMA

Growing into one of the best players of a generation, Griezmann is always a man for the big occasion



Antoine Griezmann is a cheat code. The Frenchman can find space like no one else in football and when he gets the ball, he always does something special with it. The bigger the game, the better he becomes.

For around a decade, Griezmann has been one of the most watchable footballers on Earth – and not just for his celebrations, which are often inspired by his favourite video games. Griezmann has become Atlético Madrid's talisman over the years and despite the emergence of more and more French wonderkids, he's always the first name on the teamsheet for his intelligence, his composure and his uncanny ability to find the net. He may never receive the plaudits he truly deserves, with bigger names like Kylian Mbappé and Lionel Messi stealing headlines when he's played with them: but Griezmann is a manager's favourite. France and Atlético wouldn't have won nearly as many trophies without him.

FRANCE'S GOLDEN BOY

Over the years, Griezmann has become France's most important player. Though many focused on Paul Pogba, Mbappé or N'Golo Kanté, Griezmann had his big moment in the 2018 World Cup final, scoring a pressure penalty against Croatia as France won their second World Cup trophy. As one of Didier Deschamps' most trusted generals, he won the Player of the Tournament at Euro 2016 and reinvented himself as a midfielder for the 2022 World Cup.



GRIEZMANN

ANTOINE GRIEZMANN

BIO

Date of birth:
21 March 1991
Birthplace:
Mâcon, France
Nationality:
French
Height: 1.76m (5'9")
Position: Midfield, Forward
Teams:
Real Sociedad (2009-14), Atlético Madrid (2014-19), Barcelona (2019-22), Atlético Madrid (2022-present)
Number: 7

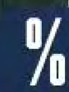


MAJOR HONOURS

1x UEFA Europa League

1x Copa del Rey

1x FIFA World Cup



STATS & RECORDS

178 – most goals for Atlético Madrid

84 – most consecutive games at international level

6 – most goals scored at Euro 2016

FUN FACT

Griezmann is a massive fan of the *Football Manager* game: expect to see him coaching one day.

Images Getty

JOHAN CRUYFF

Perhaps the most innovative player the game has ever seen, this free-flowing Dutchman introduced the world to Total Football

Johan Cruyff was a fascinating character. At Ajax in the 1960s and the Netherlands in the 1970s, manager Rinus Michels adopted a philosophy – known as Total Football – in which any player could fill any role in the side, in one of the most exciting, attractive styles of football ever seen. But even though these were teams in which anyone could defend and anyone could score, Cruyff was the star.

The Dutchman was quick, strong and had a fantastic eye for goal – but above anything else, he was incredibly intelligent, inventing things that would be talked about for decades to come. His iconic Cruyff Turn was a piece of genius designed to get him out of a tight spot, while in one game, he and a teammate passed a penalty in order to fool a poor, unsuspecting goalkeeper.

As a manager, Cruyff would revolutionise the game further, with Pep Guardiola his golden player. And it all stemmed from his days as the Netherlands' greatest-ever superstar.

FUN FACT

Cruyff ripped one of Adidas's three stripes off his kits, out of loyalty to his sponsor, Puma.



Left Cruyff was a genius when it came to keeping control of the ball

THE CRUYFF TURN

In 1974, in front of the world, Cruyff performed one of the most simple, yet iconic skills the world would ever see. Against Sweden in Dortmund, the Netherlands' star found himself in a tight spot trying to get into the penalty box, swivelled and turned 180 degrees, taking the ball with him. Football would never be the same again – and every footballer and kid in the playground has tried it since.



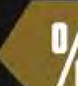
BIO

Date of birth: 25 April 1947
Birthplace: Amsterdam, Netherlands
Nationality: Dutch
Height: 1.78m (5'10")
Position: Midfielder/Forward
Teams: Ajax (1964-73), Barcelona (1973-78), Los Angeles Aztecs (1979), Washington Diplomats (1980), Levante (1981), Washington Diplomats (1981), Ajax (1981-83), Feyenoord (1983-84)
Numbers: 9, 14



MAJOR HONOURS

- 9x Eredivisie
- 3x Ballon d'Or
- 3x European Cup
- 6x Dutch Cup
- 1x La Liga
- 1x Copa del Rey



STATS & RECORDS

143 – goals and assists in 180 official matches for Barcelona

2,000,000 dollars spent on his transfer to Barcelona, a then world record

9 – joint-most Eredivisie titles

Getty Images

FUN FACT
Hegerberg was the first winner of the Ballon d'Or Féminin.

ADA HEGERBER

The free-scoring Norwegian dynamo continues to leave her mark both on and off the pitch


Right With her goalscoring record, images such as these have become a familiar sight



BIO

Date of birth: 10 July 1995
Birthplace: Molde, Norway
Nationality: Norwegian
Height: 1.79m (5'10")
Position: Forward
Teams: Kolbotn (2010-11), Stabæk (2012-13), Turbine Potsdam (2013-14), Lyon (2014-present)
Number: 14



MAJOR HONOURS

8x Division 1 Féminine

1x Ballon d'Or Féminin

6x UEFA Women's Champions League



STATS & RECORDS

15 – most goals scored in a UEFA Women's Champions League season

26 – league goals in first season at Lyon (in 22 games)

19 – her age when she won her first Division 1 Féminine title

G

On the basis of her career alone, Ada Hegerberg is a remarkable individual. Wherever she's played, she has made goals look easy to come by – not many have managed to notch up 300 of them by the age of 23.

She hit the world stage aged just 15 for the Norwegian national team, and hasn't looked back. Since moving to Lyon in 2014, her record speaks for itself: 264 goals across 240 games, eight league titles, six Champions League trophies (she remains the tournament's all-time highest scorer), the 2018 Ballon d'Or Féminin, and many others.

It's been her willingness to sacrifice further accolades for what she believes in, however, that has also garnered headlines. Dissatisfied at the lack of parity between the women's team and their male counterparts, in 2017 she retired from playing for Norway. She returned in 2022, satisfied that things had improved.

It's this mantra that has helped Hegerberg remain an icon: success, but completely on her own terms.

Images Getty; Alamy

TEMPORARY RESIGNATION

Having been long dissatisfied with how women's football was being treated in Norway, the side's lacklustre performance in the 2017 European Championship was the final straw. Describing herself as "mentally broken" and her time there as "deeply depressing", it was four years before she returned to international duty.





FIRST CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WIN

Having joined Lyon in 2014, it wasn't long before she started bringing in the silverware. She took home one of the game's highest accolades in 2016, scoring in a 1-1 draw with Wolfsburg in the Women's Champions League final, before slotting home the first penalty as Lyon won the subsequent shootout. There would be many more trophies to come.



14

FUN FACT

Hegerberg is married to another professional footballer – former Celtic and Wigan defender, Thomas Rogne.



SIGNING FOR LYON

While making an impression at an early age in her career, chances to reach the top stage in Norway were always going to be limited. After spending a season in Germany with Turbine Potsdam, she was snapped up by the French giants. Goals and broken records would inevitably come her way.



FUN FACT
Hegerberg has a tattoo on the back of her leg of a skull – she pretended to teammates that it was of a distant ancestor.

FIRST BALLON D'OR WINNER

The establishment of the Ballon d'Or Féminin as the premier award for the best female footballer in the world was another important step in promoting parity between the men's and women's game. Fittingly, it was Hegerberg who took the first award, adding yet another trophy to her no doubt bulging cabinet!

Images Getty; Alamy

FUN FACT
Osimhen became the first African to be crowned Serie A's top scorer in 2023.

VICTOR OSIMHEN

The Lion of Africa, Victor Osimhen is one of the most dangerous strikers on Earth

OSIMHEN

VICTOR OSIMHEN

Napoli conquered Italy over 30 years ago, with Diego Maradona as the jewel in the crown: in 2023, it was Victor Osimhen as the leading forward, inspiring the team to great things.

The Nigerian is a very different type of player. He's tall, physical, ruthless and incredibly quick. After learning his craft in Germany, France and Belgium, he took the leap to Italy and has become one of African football's most exciting talents, terrifying defenders with his speed and strength. He became one of the most expensive strikers on Earth when he moved to Italy – but he's incredibly cool, too: the forward never looks like he's on the biggest stage, he just plays with the kind of composure and calmness you'd expect of someone having a kickabout on the street with their mates.

And he's not yet hit his prime: he's definitely going to be one to watch over the next few years, as he develops his talents.



Left Osimhen has been linked with a host of Europe's biggest clubs

THE PRIDE OF NIGERIA

When it comes to African players on the world stage, only George Weah has won the Ballon d'Or. However, Osimhen became the first Nigerian to feature in the top ten of the award's vote in 2023, following his incredible year with Napoli in which he won the Serie A title. The striker was one of the standout stars in European football during that calendar year and one of the most electric footballers to play in Naples since Maradona graced the team.



BIO

Date of birth: 29 December 1998
Birthplace: Lagos, Nigeria
Nationality: Nigerian
Height: 1.85m (6'1")
Position: Forward
Teams: Wolfsburg (2017-19), Charleroi (2019), Lille (2019-20), Napoli (2020-present)
Number: 9

MAJOR HONOURS

1x Serie A

STATS & RECORDS

10 – goals in just seven appearances for Nigeria under-17s

€70,000,000 – transfer fee paid by Napoli, the highest for an African player

0.77 – goals per game for Nigeria

Images Getty

ERLING HAALAND

A frightening combination of pace, strength and finishing ability has propelled Norway's goalscoring 'Terminator' to the very top

There are no sure things in football, but adding the best young striker in the world to the most dominant team in the Premier League comes pretty close. When Erling Haaland signed for Manchester City in 2022, few doubted he would be a success. But even the most optimistic of City fans had their expectations blown out of the water by the towering Norwegian striker.

Haaland's 36 league goals in his debut campaign broke the single-season record for the Premier League era, and in total he notched a staggering 52 strikes in 53 total games as City secured a historic treble. Defenders in England found themselves outpaced and overpowered, just as their equivalents in Germany, Austria and Norway had done previously, and goalkeepers were repeatedly forced to watch a blonde ponytail wheeling away in celebration after yet another ruthless finish. With Haaland still in his early twenties, it's a sight we'd all better get used to.

FUN FACT

Haaland was a supporter of Leeds United as a child, his father having played for the club.



BIO

Date of birth: 21 July 2000
Birthplace: Leeds, England
Nationality: Norwegian
Height: 1.94m (6'4")
Position: Forward
Teams: Bryne (2016-17), Molde (2017-19), Red Bull Salzburg (2019-20), Borussia Dortmund (2020-22), Manchester City (2022-present)
Number: 9



MAJOR HONOURS

2x Premier League
1x German Cup
1x UEFA Champions League
1x FA Cup



STATS & RECORDS

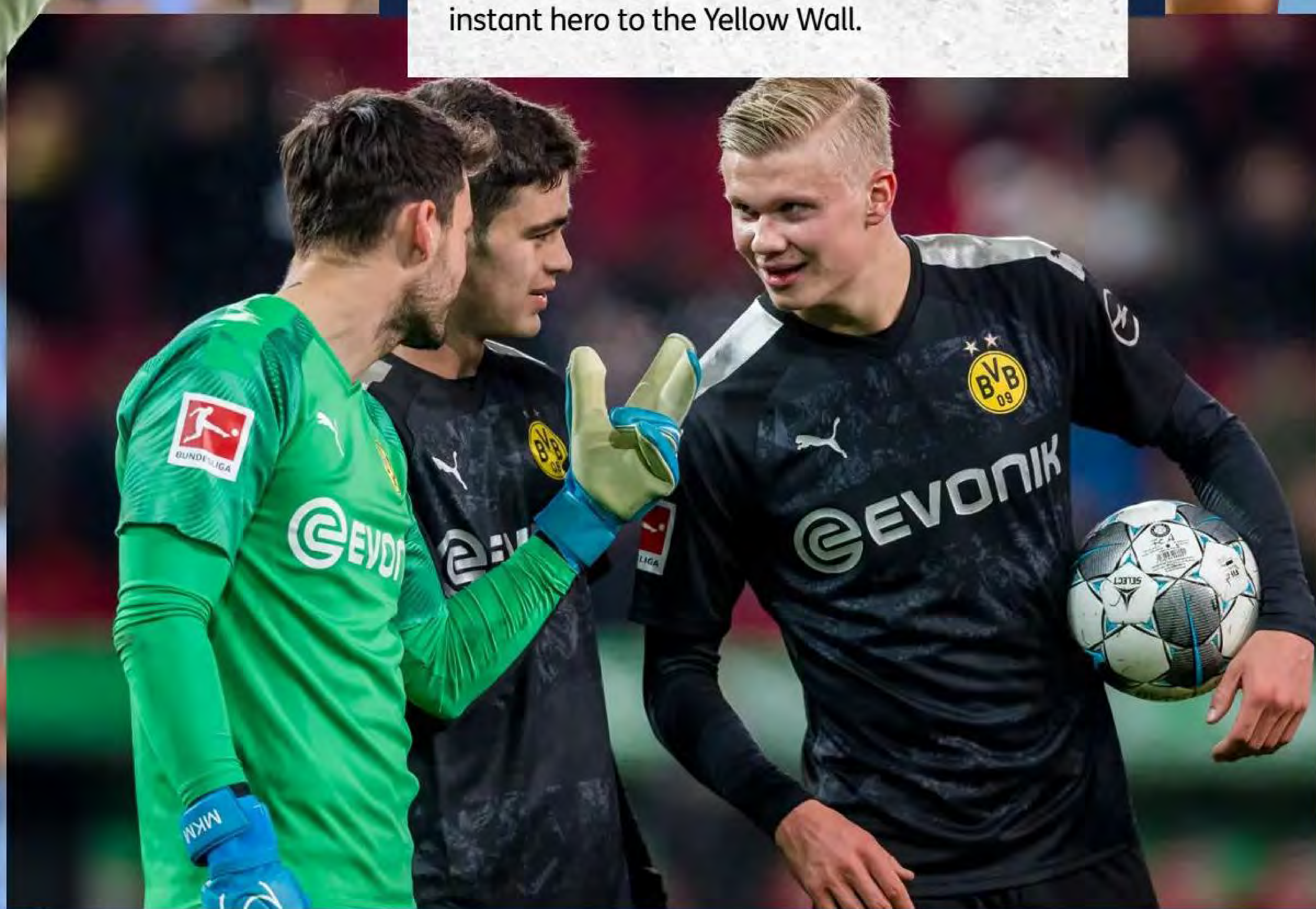
36 – most goals ever scored in a Premier League season

35 GAMES – quickest player to 40 UEFA Champions League goals

0.97 – goals per game ratio while at Borussia Dortmund

DORTMUND DEBUT DREAMLAND

Hopes were high for Haaland's introduction to life at Borussia Dortmund. He was fresh off an exceptional half-season at Red Bull Salzburg in Austria, but the German Bundesliga would surely be a much tougher challenge. Not so, it seems. Coming on as a second-half substitute against Augsburg with Dortmund trailing, Haaland rifled home once, twice, three times in just 23 minutes to turn the tide and become an instant hero to the Yellow Wall.



Images Getty

FUN FACT

Haaland's father also played for Manchester City, and was the victim of an infamous Roy Keane tackle.

Left Despite having an exceptional goalscoring record, Haaland has yet to feature at a major international tournament with Norway

A NINE-GOAL DEMOLITION

Haaland first made major waves in the footballing world in 2019, when he scored an astonishing nine goals in a FIFA U20 World Cup match against Honduras. The then-18-year-old's triple hat-trick ensured that he won the tournament's golden boot award, despite Norway failing to make it out of the group stages. He was called up to the senior national team shortly after.





STEPPING UP IN EUROPE

Incredible debut performances have become something of a trademark for Haaland, and his maiden Champions League appearance was no different. Lining up for Salzburg to face Genk in the group stage, Haaland was in deadly form. The striker netted three first-half goals to open his account in elite European competition and announce himself on the biggest stage.

"HE REPLACED KYLIAN MBAPPÉ AS THE YOUNGEST PLAYER TO REACH 30 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GOALS"

A FIVE-STAR PERFORMANCE

Hat-tricks have become routine for Haaland – he's already amassed 21 in his career to date – but sometimes the goals don't stop at three. That was the case in City's Champions League knockout match against RB Leipzig in 2023, where the striker netted an incredible five goals in a 7-0 drubbing. In the process he replaced Kylian Mbappé as the youngest player to reach 30 Champions League goals.

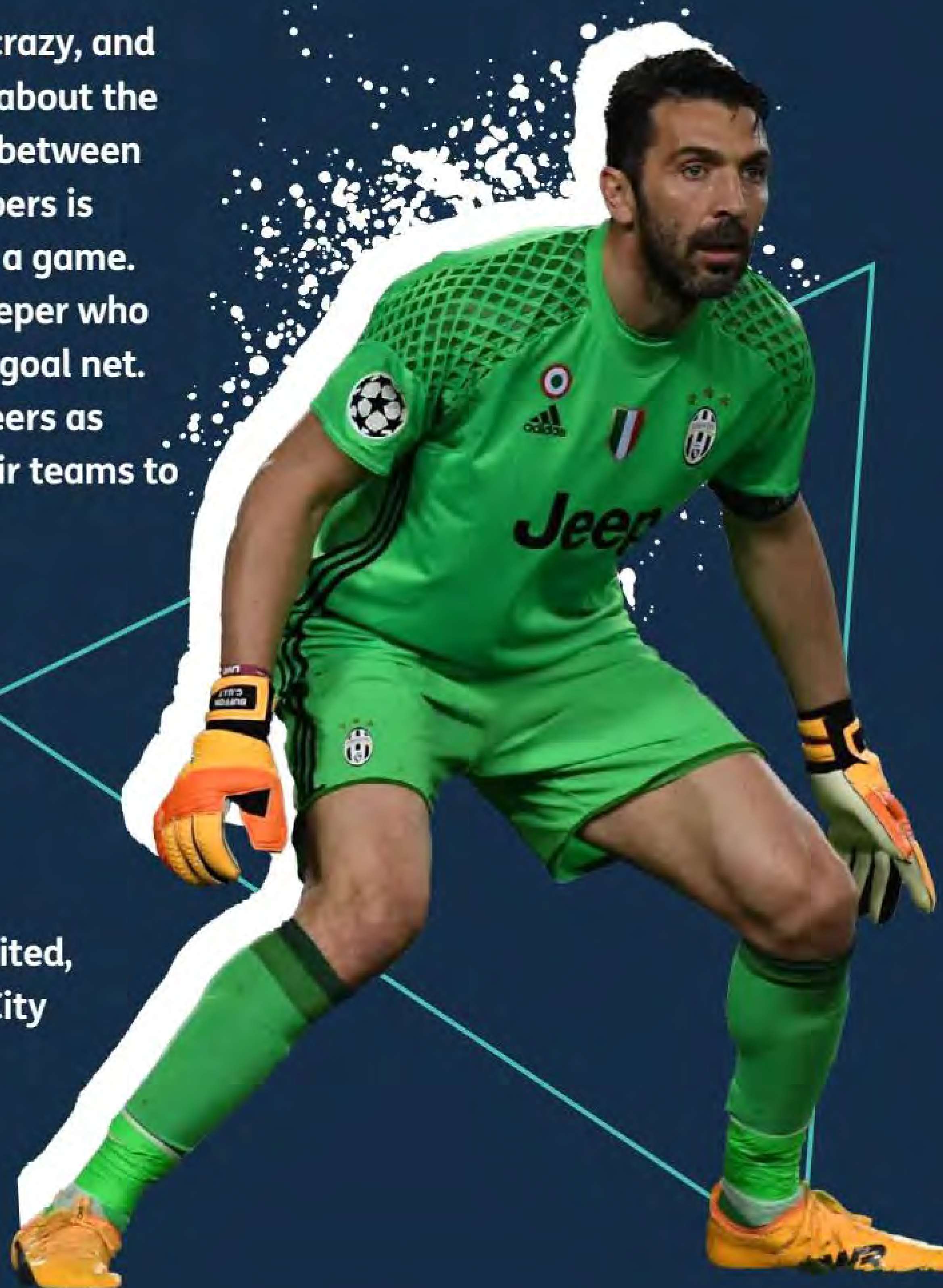
FUN FACT
In his first two Premier League seasons, Haaland scored against all 22 teams he faced.

Images Getty

TOP 10 GOALKEEPERS

Agility, composure and spectacular saves made these players a reliable last line of defence

They say goalkeepers are a little bit crazy, and there's certainly something unique about the greatest ever players who've stood between the sticks. The pressure on goalkeepers is immense. A single mistake can lose a game. There's no safety net to rescue a keeper who makes a calamitous error – just their own goal net. Meet the top keepers who spent their careers as dependable shot stoppers and carried their teams to major honours.





PETER SCHMEICHEL

NATIONALITY Danish
ACTIVE 1981-2003
TEAMS Hvidovre, Brøndby, Manchester United, Sporting Lisbon, Aston Villa, Manchester City
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 1x UEFA Champions League, 5x Premier League, 3x FA Cup, 1x Portuguese Primeira Liga

Alex Ferguson describes Schmeichel as one of his greatest signings – and he's not wrong. The Great Dane became the lynchpin of Ferguson's first Premier League-winning sides, with his hulking frame making him an imposing presence and a great shot stopper.



OLIVER KAHN

NATIONALITY German
ACTIVE 1987-2008
TEAMS Karlsruher, Bayern Munich
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 1x UEFA Champions League, 8x Bundesliga, 6x German Cup

Kahn was so reliable in the Germany goal that he was named best player at the 2002 World Cup, despite being on the losing side in the final. He wasn't short of silverware, though. Kahn's Germany won the Euros at Wembley in 1996 and Bayern romped to eight league titles with Kahn between the sticks.

GIANLUIGI BUFFON

NATIONALITY Italian
ACTIVE 1995-2023
TEAMS Parma, Juventus, Paris Saint-Germain
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 10x Serie A, 1x Ligue 1, 1x UEFA Cup, 1x Coppa Italia

Buffon kept a clean sheet in his debut at age 17 for hometown Parma against AC Milan. He retired 28 seasons later having returned to Parma for a swansong, having become a Juventus legend in the meantime, winning ten league championships and making more Serie A appearances than any other player.

ANDONI ZUBIZARRETA

NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 1979-98
TEAMS Alaves, Athletic Bilbao, Barcelona, Valencia
MAJOR HONOURS 1x European Cup, 6x La Liga, 1x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, 3x Copa del Rey

Zubizarreta's highlight reel doesn't contain the same number of spectacular saves as many of his peers, but that's due to his consistency and excellent positional sense that enabled him to snuff out attacks without having to dive full-length to block the ball. Thanks to his reliability, Zubizarreta holds the record for the most La Liga clean sheets.





DINO ZOFF

NATIONALITY Italian
ACTIVE 1961-83
TEAMS Udinese, Mantova, Napoli, Juventus
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA European Championship, 6x Serie A, 1x UEFA Cup, 2x Coppa Italia

The only player to have won the Euros and World Cup with Italy, Zoff also kept the ball out of his Italy goal for an international record of 1,142 minutes over almost two years. He kept a clean sheet in exactly half of his 720 club games, helping Juventus to a host of trophies during his time in Turin.



JOSÉ LUIS CHILAVERT

NATIONALITY Paraguayan
ACTIVE 1982-2004
TEAMS Sportivo Luqueno, Guarani, San Lorenzo, Real Zaragoza, Vélez Sarsfield, Strasbourg, Peñarol
MAJOR HONOURS 1x Copa Libertadores, 1x Paraguayan Primera Division, 4x Argentine Primera Division, 1x Uruguayan Primera Division, 1x French Cup

Chilavert won multiple trophies across South America and rose to global prominence near the end of his career. In the run-up to the 2002 World Cup, Chilavert scored four goals during the qualification process thanks to his ability to hit accurate free kicks and penalties, and he's one of only three keepers to have scored a hat-trick.



LEV YASHIN

NATIONALITY Russian
ACTIVE 1950-70
TEAMS Dynamo Moscow
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 5x Soviet Top League, 1x Ballon d'Or

The Black Spider ignored the norm of keepers staying on their line and charged out of goal to narrow the angle and block attackers. Yashin plied his trade behind the Iron Curtain in Moscow but earned the respect of international opponents in 74 games for the USSR and is the only goalkeeper to have won the Ballon d'Or.



IKER CASILLAS

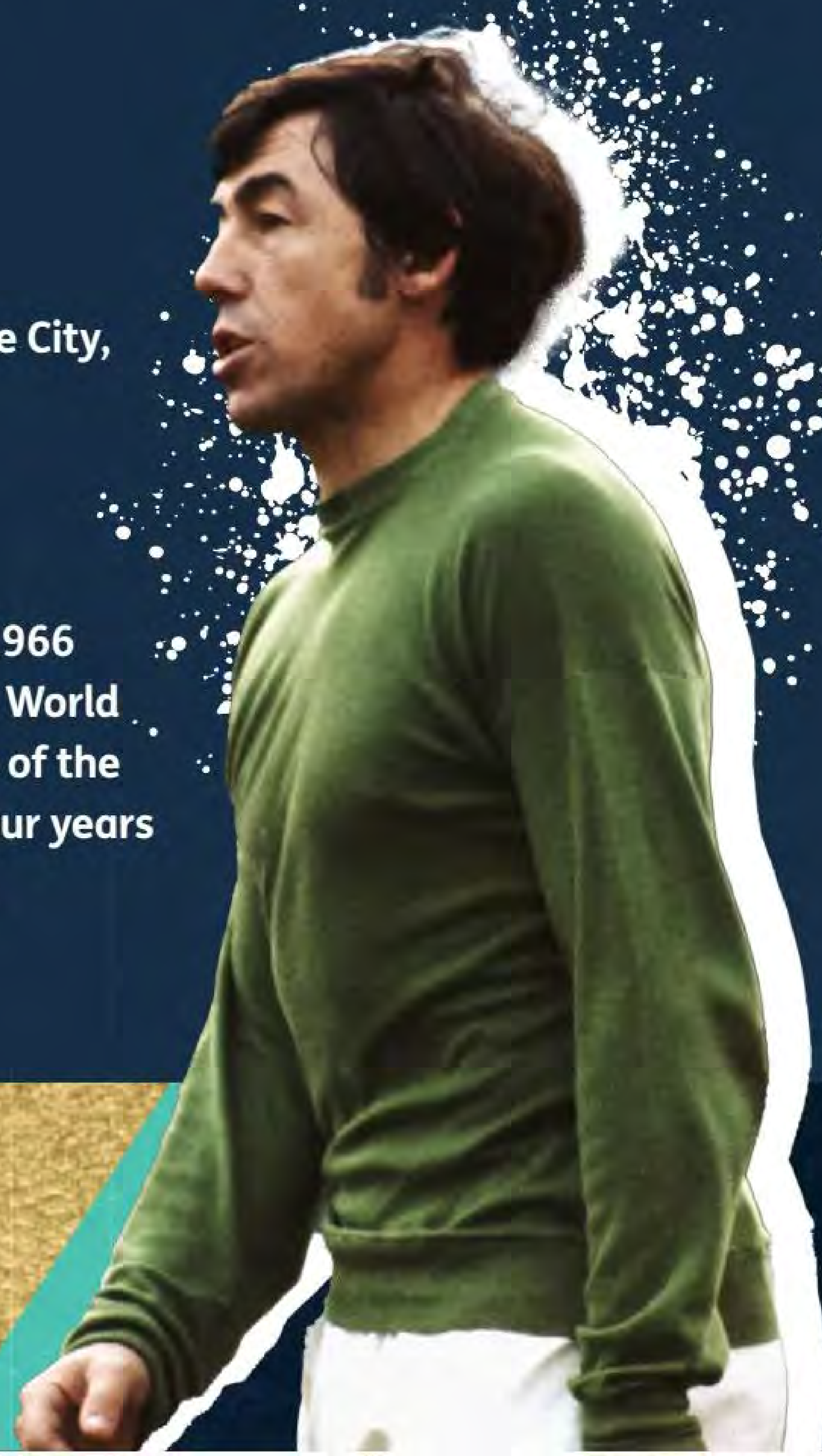
NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 1998-2020
TEAMS Real Madrid, Porto
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 2x UEFA European Championship, 3x UEFA Champions League, 5x La Liga, 1x Portuguese Primeira Liga, 2x Copa del Rey

Aged just 19 when he helped Real Madrid win the Champions League in 2000, Casillas was just as successful during the rest of his career. He was the last man at the back during Spain's golden era, added another two Champions League titles with Madrid, and won the Portuguese league title.

GORDON BANKS

NATIONALITY English
ACTIVE 1958-78
TEAMS Chesterfield, Leicester City, Stoke City, Fort Lauderdale Strikers
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup

FIFA named Banks the world's best goalkeeper six years in a row between 1966 and 1971, a period that saw him lift the World Cup with England in 1966. He made one of the greatest saves in history to deny Pelé four years later, with a typical Banks cat-like dive.



MANUEL NEUER

NATIONALITY German
ACTIVE 2005-present
TEAMS Schalke 04, Bayern Munich
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 2x UEFA Champions League, 11x Bundesliga, 6x German Cup

Neuer embraces the fashion of rushing out of goal and playing as a sweeper-keeper, helping maintain a high defensive line. Although he throttles attacks before they've begun, Neuer also has the ability to pull off reflex saves to block the ball with his arms and legs.



KYLIAN MBAPPÉ

Since bursting onto the scene as a teenager, Mbappé has been one of the most thrilling footballers in the world

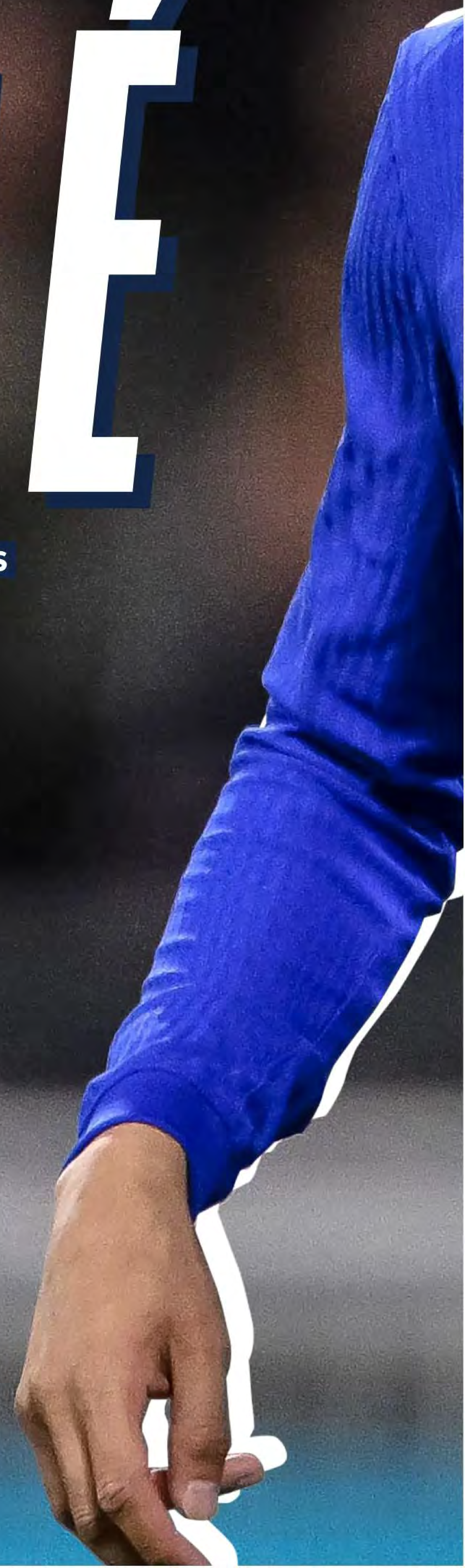
Never has a footballer looked so obviously destined to become the best in the world. When Kylian Mbappé first took to the stage as a teenager at Monaco, no one could keep up with him – and over the years, the childish grin has furrowed into a frown: these days he means business, as he scores goals for both club and country.

Mbappé won the World Cup at the first time of asking, became arguably PSG's greatest-ever player before the age of 23 and would go down as a legend of the game if he were to retire tomorrow. That he's still perhaps not even reached his peak is a scary prospect indeed. There's no catching him up – either for the other wonderkids looking to match his talent, or the defenders simply looking to take the ball away from him.

FUN FACT

Mbappé smashed Thierry Henry's record as Monaco's youngest-ever player in 2015, aged just 16.







BIO

Date of birth: 20 December 1998
Birthplace: Paris, France
Nationality: French
Height: 1.78m (5'10")
Position: Forward
Teams: Monaco (2015-18), Paris Saint-Germain (2018-2024)
Number: 7



MAJOR HONOURS

7x Ligue 1
1x FIFA World Cup
4x Coupe de France



STATS & RECORDS

3 – joint-most goals scored in a World Cup final

256 – most goals for PSG

19 – career hat-tricks across seven different competitions

Images Getty

BURSTING ONTO THE SCENE

In 2016-17, Mbappé emerged as one of the most exciting wonderkids in a generation. Alongside the veteran Radamel Falcao, the teenager led Monaco to a highly unexpected Champions League semi-final. With pace to burn and an eye for goal beyond his years, Mbappé was almost a fully-formed talent at the age of 18 – and he's only gone onto bigger things since.



FUN FACT

Mbappé once clocked a speed 0.25mph faster than Usain Bolt's average during his 100m world record win in 2009.



THE REAL DEAL

Mbappé has always been one of the most unpredictable players in the world – but in 2022, he did something unexpected off the field, turning down Real Madrid in favour of remaining at PSG. However, in 2024 he announced his intention to leave Paris, though not before breaking PSG's goalscoring record and playing alongside Lionel Messi in Ligue 1, with Madrid seen as his most likely destination.

KYLIAN

FUN FACT

Mbappé was a musical prodigy as a child and could reportedly play the flute.

"MBAPPÉ BECAME ONLY THE SECOND MAN IN HISTORY TO NET THREE GOALS IN A WORLD CUP FINAL"



Right While he may have lost out in 2022, Mbappé lifted the World Cup four years earlier

HAT-TRICK HERO

It's not often you score a hat-trick and don't win – and Mbappé became only the second man in history to net three goals in a World Cup final when he dragged France to penalties against Argentina in Qatar in 2022. While club team-mate Lionel Messi would end up lifting the trophy, it was Mbappé who won the Golden Boot.

THE RECORD MOVE

In 2017, Mbappé signed for Paris Saint-Germain – a team he supported as a kid – on loan with a mandatory option for the Parisiens to buy him for €180 million. In doing so, he became the second-most expensive footballer ever – behind Neymar – and the most expensive teenager of all time. Plenty would be linked with him over the next few years, as Mbappé would become one of the most sought-after players of his age.





Images Getty

MIA HAMM

This icon of the women's game is a true trailblazer, giving the new generation a hero to look up to

While the majority of players in this book have benefitted from starring in the most publicised sport in the world, women a generation ago weren't so lucky, having to forge their sport's reputation by themselves, without the aid of free publicity. Mia Hamm was one of the stars of the nascent years of women's football, starring for the USA national team for the best part of two decades, scoring 158 goals across 276 games.

Ploughing on amid underfunding and media indifference, Hamm's extraordinary record in college football saw her gain international recognition. While the USA's 1991 World Cup victory in China was barely reported on, their success in the 1996 Olympics turned Hamm into an icon. By 1999 – the year of the USA's second World Cup win – she had already broken the all-time international scoring record.

Named in the top 125 players by no less than Pelé in 2004, Hamm remains a stalwart of women's football – now far more widely watched, thanks in no small part to her legacy.

HAMM
MIA HAMM

FUN FACT
Hamm retains the highest amount of assists for the USA women's national team – 144.



ON TOP OF THE WORLD

It's been said that success comes in pairs – and that was certainly the case for Hamm back in 1999. First, she scored her 108th USA goal to take the record for most international goals in a 3-0 victory over Brazil. For probably the best encore of all time, she more than played her part as the USA defeated China on penalties to take home the World Cup – a win that was to have a transformative effect on women's football.



BIO

Date of birth: 17 March 1972
Birthplace: Selma, USA
Nationality: American
Height: 1.65m (5'5")
Position: Midfielder/Forward
Team: Washington Freedom (2001-03)
Number: 9



MAJOR HONOURS

2x FIFA World Cup

2x Olympic Gold



STATS & RECORDS

0.57 – goals per game for USA

158 GOALS – the second most for the USA women's team

15 – her age when she was capped by the USA for the first time

"THE USA'S SUCCESS IN THE 1996 OLYMPICS TURNED HAMM INTO AN ICON"

Images Getty

PELÉ

If there's a name synonymous with football, it's Pelé – Brazil's 'king' and the sport's first global icon

LEGEND

PELÉ

It's not unreasonable to suggest that modern football – the international game we know and love today – was born with Pelé. There had been great players before, but when the unheralded teenager emerged fully formed to take the 1958 World Cup by storm, the sport had its first unquestionable star. A formidable goalscorer who played with typically Brazilian joie de vivre, Pelé mastered almost every attacking aspect of the game: shooting, dribbling, heading, creating. That he played almost his entire career with Santos in Brazil no doubt added to the legend. European fans would have to wait years for a glimpse of the boy wonder, and in the meantime they'd hear stories of incredible skills and impossible goals. When the World Cup finally rolled around, Pelé exceeded even those expectations. Watch those games back and you'll see a striker who had the balance, vision and football genius to thrive in any era.



RIGHT Still only 17 years old at the time, Pelé was a revelation at the 1958 World Cup



A CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT

The 1970 World Cup would be Pelé's last, that was for sure. But would it end in glory, as in 1958 and 1962, or heartbreak like 1966? Twelve years on from his breakthrough in Sweden, Brazil's living legend led a new generation of stars to an emphatic 4-1 win in the final over Italy. Scoring one and assisting two (including Carlos Alberto's legendary goal) Pelé exited the world stage at his very peak.



BIO

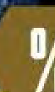
Date of birth: 23 October 1940
Birthplace: Três Corações, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.73m (5'8")
Position: Forward
Teams: Santos (1956-74), New York Cosmos (1975-77)
Number: 10



MAJOR HONOURS

3x FIFA World Cup

2x Copa Libertadores



STATS & RECORDS

1,279 – most career goals scored

3 – most FIFA World Cup wins

7 – most hat-tricks for Brazil

FUN FACT

At 17 years and 239 days, Pelé is the youngest ever goalscorer at the FIFA World Cup.

Images Getty

BUKAYO SAKA

Saka stepped into the Arsenal team as a teenager and has gone on to become a world-class winger

Bukayo Saka first came into an Arsenal side who were down on their luck and devoid of ideas. With him as the biggest talent in their side, however, they've turned things around to challenge for trophies.

When he's in full flow, Saka is one of the most thrilling players around, able to beat his defender on either side to set up teammates or score for himself. But it's his intelligence that makes him so good: Saka always makes the right decision and even though he's still only young, he plays like an experienced veteran.

As a key player for Arsenal and England, the winger has established himself as tricky, pacy and with an eye for a spectacular curling shot with his left foot. Saka is already one of the best players in the world and he might just go on to bigger and better things – for club and country.

"SAKA IS ALREADY ONE OF THE BEST PLAYERS IN THE WORLD AND HE MIGHT JUST GO ON TO BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS – FOR CLUB AND COUNTRY"



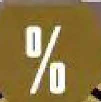
BIO

Date of birth:
5 September 2001
Birthplace:
Ealing, England
Nationality:
English
Height: 1.78m (5'10")
Position: Midfielder/Forward
Team:
Arsenal (2018-present)
Number: 7



MAJOR HONOURS

1x
FA Cup



STATS & RECORDS

2 – England men's Player of the Year awards

14 – goals en route to Arsenal finishing 2nd in the PL in 2022-23

50 – the youngest player to score 50 goals for Arsenal (aged 22)

Images Getty

7



FUN FACT

Saka began his time under Mikel Arteta as a left-back, before moving to right-wing position.

YOUNG GUN

Saka burst into the spotlight as a teenager, becoming a rare bright spark in a misfiring Arsenal team. He quickly established himself as a fan favourite with his pace and ability to beat defenders – and when new manager Mikel Arteta arrived, he built his young team around Saka, who was given the legendary No.7 shirt at the Emirates Stadium.

EUROS HEARTBREAK

Saka was one of the most exciting young players at Euro 2020, impressing from the right-wing as he became a starter as the competition went on. But his tournament ended in disappointment when Saka missed the decisive penalty in the shootout against Italy in the final. The winger bounced back though, leading Arsenal back into the Champions League with 14 goals the next season.

BUKAYO

SAKA

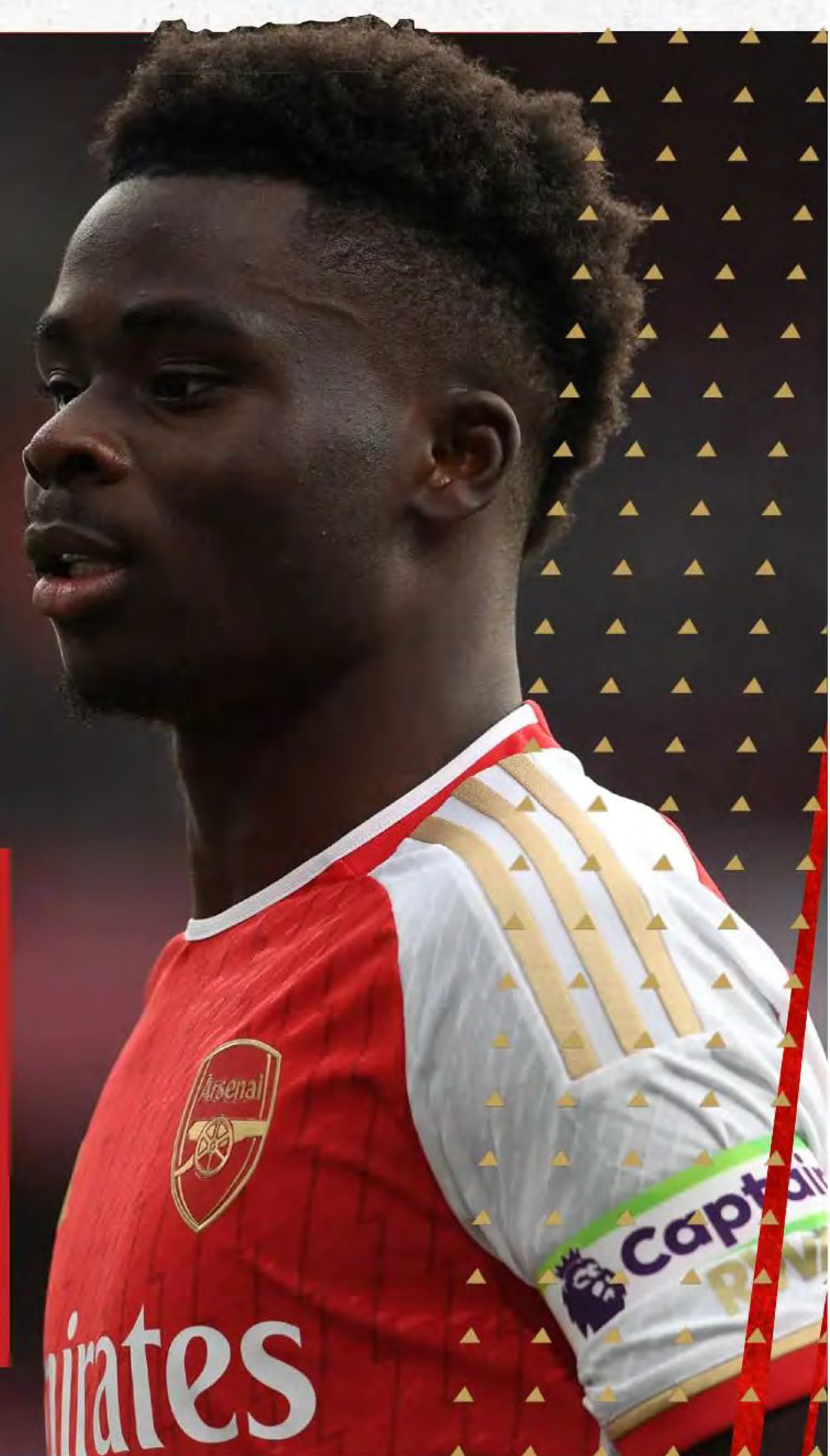
BUKAYO SAKA



SAKA AND EMILE SMITH ROWE

As one of two young academy players who burst onto the scene at Arsenal at the same time, Gunners fans referenced Saka and Emile Smith Rowe in a chant that rang around the Emirates Stadium in 2021-22. With the likes of Reiss Nelson, Eddie Nketiah and others getting chances from the Arsenal academy, Saka has helped pave the way for youngsters to become major stars at the club.





CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

Saka has always been described as polite, hard-working and mature – and he was given the captain's armband for the first time in a 5-0 home win against Sheffield United in October 2023. It shows his leadership skills at such a young age and weeks later, he became the fourth youngest Arsenal player to have made 200 appearances for the club he supported growing up.

FUN FACT

Saka released his own sauce at chicken restaurant Nando's in March 2024.

Images Getty

ROBERT LEWANDO

The Polish goal machine has found the back of the net for fun, wherever he's playing

In almost any other era, the goalscoring exploits of Robert Lewandowski would place him up there with the select band of greats. He can perhaps count himself unfortunate to have found himself in an age where Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo were busy smashing all the records they could reach, but that shouldn't detract from the achievements of Poland's all-time top scorer.

Having scored 103 goals in 187 games during four years at Borussia Dortmund (during which he twice helped them to Bundesliga wins), he carried on finding the back of the net at Bayern Munich, netting 344 goals across 375 matches and eight seasons, and taking home eight league titles and a Champions League trophy for good measure. In short, he's one of the world's most brutally efficient goal machines. Currently playing for Barcelona in Spain, age has not dulled his dedication, aerial prowess or ability to make the net bulge.

LEWANDOWSKI

ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI



BIO

Date of birth: 21 August 1988
Birthplace: Warsaw, Poland
Nationality: Polish
Height: 1.85m (6'1")
Position: Forward
Teams: Znicz Pruszków (2006-08), Lech Poznań (2008-10), Borussia Dortmund (2010-14), Bayern Munich (2014-22), Barcelona (2022-present)
Number: 9



MAJOR HONOURS

10x Bundesliga
1x La Liga
1x UEFA Champions League
1x Polish Ekstraklasa
4x German Cup



STATS & RECORDS

238 – goals in 253 league games for Bayern Munich

9 MINUTES – the time it took for him to score five goals for Bayern Munich against Wolfsburg in 2015

22 – most consecutive Champions League match wins

FUN FACT

Lewandowski has been named the Polish Footballer of the Year 11 times – a record.

WSKI

THE MAGIC NUMBER

Among his numerous awards, the treble season of 2019-20 stands out. Putting away an incredible 55 goals across all competitions as Bayern finished 13 points clear to take home the Bundesliga title, they defeated Bayer Leverkusen 4-2 to claim the DFB Cup, and pipped Paris St-Germain 1-0 in the Champions League final in Lisbon.



Images Getty

KEVIN DE BRUYNE

Manchester City's Belgian superstar overcame some early setbacks to become one of the world's leading midfielders

DE BRUYNE

KEVIN DE BRUYNE

FUN FACT

Only Manchester United legend Ryan Giggs has more Premier League assists than De Bruyne.



A WORLD CUP WONDER STRIKE

As part of Belgium's 'golden generation', De Bruyne played a key role in his country's best-ever World Cup performance. Going up against much-fancied Brazil in the quarter-finals, the Red Devils pulled off a spectacular 2-1 upset to reach the semis. And of course it was KDB who sealed the win, firing home a trademark piledriver from the edge of the box.

There's arguably no one in world football who can strike a ball with as much power, control and accuracy as Kevin De Bruyne. After failing to break through as a youngster at Chelsea, the Belgian blossomed in the Bundesliga before earning a big-money move back to England with Manchester City.

Since then, KDB has become the foundation of Pep Guardiola's all-conquering side, managing to stand out for his unique skillset even in a team stacked with talent. At City, he's mastered the art of the assist, with teammates often left with the easiest of tap-ins after a viciously whipped cross or perfectly weighted through ball. He's scored his fair share too, and his goals almost never disappoint.

The De Bruyne highlight reel is packed with thunderous volleys, outrageous chips and rifled shots, often after a bursting run from deep. Man City fans will hope there are plenty more still to come.



Right De Bruyne has developed a deadly partnership with Erling Haaland, assisting many of the striker's goals

17



BIO

Date of birth: 28 June 1991
Birthplace: Drongen, Belgium
Nationality: Belgian
Height: 1.81m (5'11")
Position: Midfielder
Teams: Genk (2008-12), Chelsea (2012-14), VfL Wolfsburg (2014-15), Manchester City (2015-present)
Number: 17



MAJOR HONOURS

- 1x Belgian Pro League
- 2x FA Cup
- 6x Premier League
- 1x German Cup
- 1x UEFA Champions League

STATS & RECORDS

20 – joint most assists in a Premier League season

£55 MILLION – the fee paid by Man City in 2015, a then club record

0.45 – assists per game for Man City

Images Getty

TOP 10 DEFENDERS

From rapid wing-backs to canny sweepers, get up close with the most dependable defenders in world football

Although it's spectacular goals that are highlighted in television coverage, success on the pitch isn't just about scoring – a team also needs to prevent the ball hitting the back of their own net. Defenders may not garner the headlines, but their resilience at the back can propel teams to championships, and this shortlist of elite defenders has frustrated some of the world's most talented forwards.



FRANZ BECKENBAUER

NATIONALITY German
ACTIVE 1964-83
TEAMS Bayern Munich, New York Cosmos, Hamburg
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA European Championship, 3x European Cup, 5x Bundesliga, 4x German Cup, 1x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, 2x Ballon d'Or

The first defender to win the Ballon d'Or in 1972, Beckenbauer transformed the expectations of what a central defender can do when he converted from midfield to defence. Smooth-passing, ball-carrying Beckenbauer became the first modern sweeper, controlling the game from the back and carrying his clubs and country to glory.



CAFU

NATIONALITY Brazilian
ACTIVE 1989-2008
TEAMS São Paulo, Real Zaragoza, Juventude, Palmeiras, Roma, AC Milan
MAJOR HONOURS 2x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA Champions League, 2x Serie A, 2x Copa Libertadores, 2x Copa América, 1x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup

A dynamic and offensively minded wing-back, Cafu's pace and fine ball control saw him make surging overlapping runs down the right flank for club and country. He was also a dependable defender and was often called into duty as a centre-back, becoming Brazil's most-capped player with 142 appearances in gold.

FRANCO BARESI

NATIONALITY Italian
ACTIVE 1977-97
TEAM AC Milan
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 6x Serie A, 3x European Cup/UEFA Champions League

Italy is renowned for its production line of world-class centre-backs, and Baresi was the greatest of them all. He emerged from Milan's youth system to become the fulcrum of the successful sides that picked up six league and three European titles. As team captain, Baresi led by example, playing with discipline that meant he was rarely caught out of position.

JAVIER ZANETTI

NATIONALITY Argentine
ACTIVE 1992-2014
TEAMS Talleres, Banfield, Inter Milan
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA Champions League, 5x Serie A, 4x Coppa Italia, 1x UEFA Cup

Nicknamed 'El Tractor' for his tireless runs down the flanks, Zanetti was a durable defender with more than 1,000 senior appearances. He won more trophies in the for Inter Milan than any other player and was the first name on the team sheet during his two decades in Italy.





SAMBA SUPERSTAR
Real Madrid's Vinícius Jr runs with the ball during the Champions League semi-final second leg against Bayern Munich in May 2024.

IMAGE: GETTY / ANGEL MARTINEZ - UEFA


FIFA



STAR BOY
Arsenal's Bukayo Saka celebrates after scoring against rivals Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League in April 2024.

IMAGE: GETTY / CLIVE ROSE



THE REAL DEAL
England's Jude Bellingham takes the acclaim from the Real Madrid fans after scoring against Osasuna in La Liga in October 2023.



GOAL MACHINE
Erling Haaland scores the winner for Manchester City against his former club Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League group stages in September 2022.

IMAGE: GETTY / MARC ATKINS



ARABIAN KNIGHT
Ronaldo with a trademark free-kick for Al-Nassr in a Saudi Pro League match against Damac in October 2023.



IMAGE: GETTY / ANDREW POWELL



FRENCH CONNECTION
Kylian Mbappé enjoys the moment after opening the scoring for France against Austria in a UEFA Nations League match in September 2022.



IMAGE GETTY / JAMES WILLIAMSON - AMA



EGYPTIAN KING
Mohamed Salah celebrates after scoring for Liverpool in their Premier League match against Wolves in May 2022.



IMAGE: GETTY / FAYEZ NURELDINE


BVB
09



IMAGE: GETTY / FLORENCIA TAN JUN


Emira
FLY BE



TOP OF THE WORLD
Lionel Messi holds aloft the World Cup trophy after Argentina's victory over France at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

IMAGE: GETTY / ANNE-CHRISTINE POUJOULAT


RMCF



SERGIO RAMOS

NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 2003-present
TEAMS Sevilla, Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 2x UEFA European Championship, 5x La Liga, 2x Ligue 1, 4x UEFA Champions League, 2x Copa del Rey

A Real Madrid legend and great all-rounder, Ramos could tackle, dribble, pass and score. Usually employed as a centre-back, although he was just as capable as a full-back, Ramos saved his best performances for big matches, including two crucial goals in the 2014 and 2016 Champions League finals.



RONALD KOEMAN

NATIONALITY Dutch
ACTIVE 1980-97
TEAMS Groningen, Ajax, PSV, Barcelona, Feyenoord
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 4x Eredivisie, 4x La Liga, 2x European Cup, 3x Dutch Cup, 1x Copa del Rey

A dual-threat defender who had a shot as formidable as his tackle, Koeman scored more than 200 goals over his senior career. One of the few players to represent the three biggest clubs in the Netherlands, Koeman's greatest success came as part of Barcelona's 'Dream Team' of the early 1990s.



PAOLO MALDINI

NATIONALITY Italian
ACTIVE 1984-2009
TEAMS AC Milan
MAJOR HONOURS
5x European Cup/UEFA Champions League, 7x Serie A, 1x Coppa Italia

Although capable of playing across the back line, right-footed Maldini was used as a left-back for most of his career, every season of which was with AC Milan. Maldini tended to shadow his opponents and coax them away from goal rather than committing rash challenges, and his calm and composed demeanour helped him to eight European Cup/Champions League final appearances.



BOBBY MOORE

NATIONALITY English
ACTIVE 1958-83
TEAMS West Ham United, Fulham, San Antonio Thunder, Seattle Sounders, Herning Fremad, Carolina Lightnin'
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x FA Cup, 1x European Cup Winners' Cup

West Ham legend Moore may not have earned the same number of medals as other defenders, but he did lift the World Cup trophy as captain of England in 1966. That tournament saw Moore at his best, a calm presence at the back who anticipated his opponents' moves and snuffed out attacks.



CARLOS ALBERTO

NATIONALITY Brazilian
ACTIVE 1963-82
TEAMS Fluminense, Santos, Botafogo, Flamengo, New York Cosmos, California Surf
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup

From a nation better known for its attacking flair, Carlos Alberto was a supreme defender. Although he was technically gifted with the ability to bomb down the right wing, Alberto's main role was to command the back line, and he captained Brazil to victory in the 1970 World Cup, however, he's best-known for scoring the iconic fourth goal in Brazil's 4-1 victory over Italy in the final.



CARLES PUYOL

NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 1999-2014
TEAMS Barcelona
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA European Championship, 6x La Liga, 3x UEFA Champions League, 2x Copa del Rey

A versatile defender known as 'The Shark', Puyol was a Barcelona stalwart for the best part of two decades, spent 11 years as captain, and earned more than 100 caps for Spain. He may have lacked the stature of other centre-backs but he was a tough tackler and fearless warrior.

CRISTIANO RONALDO

From humble beginnings, CR7 would work harder than anyone to become an all-time great

Cristiano Ronaldo was always a special footballer: but through sheer hard work and his incredible mentality, he became one of the greatest players of all time.

After wowing Sir Alex Ferguson in a friendly against Manchester United, the Scotsman bought him from Sporting – and the rest is history. Steadily, he morphed from a winger to one of the most explosive forwards the game had ever seen, capable of hitting free-kicks, jumping higher than defenders for headers and smashing records at Real Madrid, Juventus and on the international scene for Juventus. He was unplayable at his best and he always scored in the biggest games.

CR7's rivalry with Lionel Messi will define a generation with fans picking a side – and for some, they saw themselves in Ronaldo. He wasn't born as the best – but he forced himself into that conversation by knuckling down and refusing to ever give up.

FUN FACT

In 2021, Ronaldo's mother, Dolores, claimed that he would have become a bricklayer if not for football.



Left At the final of the Italian Cup, where Juventus won against Atalanta, May 2021

BIO

Date of birth: 5 February 1985
Birthplace: Funchal, Madeira, Portugal
Nationality: Portuguese
Height: 1.87m (6'2")
Position: Forward
Teams: Sporting (2002-03), Manchester United (2003-09), Real Madrid (2009-18), Juventus (2018-21), Manchester United (2021-22), Al Nassr (2022-present)
Number: 7

MAJOR HONOURS

- 3x Premier League
- 5x UEFA Champions League
- 2x La Liga
- 2x Serie A
- 1x UEFA European Championship
- 1x FA Cup
- 2x Copa del Rey
- 5x Ballon d'Or
- 1x Coppa Italia

STATS & RECORDS

450 – most Real Madrid goals ever

128 – the most international goals of any male footballer

140 – most Champions League goals

RECORD-BREAKING BUY

In 2009, Ronaldo was at the top of his game, having been named in the top three of the Ballon d'Or for three consecutive years – then came the record-breaking move to Real Madrid. The Portuguese became a world transfer record for £80m. The fee was paid back, too, 450 goals later – and Ronaldo even left for a record, joining Juventus for around £100m: the most ever spent on a player over 30.



Images Getty; Alamy



MESSI VS RONALDO

Football has, for so long, been defined by the rivalry between Ronaldo and Messi. The two greatest talents of a generation both had a case for being the greatest of all time, pitting their wits against one another from opposite sides of El Clásico. Their playstyles were opposing, too, with Messi considered a natural genius, while Ronaldo has put in the hours of hard graft to elevate his talents and become a prolific goalscorer.

FUN FACT

CR7 never wanted the No.7 shirt at Manchester United, as it was too much pressure.

> "RONALDO HAS PUT IN THE HARD GRAFT TO ELEVATE HIS TALENTS AND BECOME A PROLIFIC GOALSCORER"



EURO 2016

Ronaldo was born between golden periods in Portuguese football – but helped inspire his country to a first international trophy in 2016. CR7 was integral to getting his side out of the group, netted to sink club mate Gareth Bale in the semis but was taken off injured in the final. Sure enough, he directed his teammates to victory from the touchline with manager, Fernando Santos.

Above Ronaldo returned to Manchester United in 2021 – and became the club's top scorer in his only full season



FUN FACT

Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro was named after former US president Ronald Reagan.

THE THREEPEAT

Ronaldo etched his name in Champions League history to become more associated with the competition than perhaps anyone else, breaking Raul's goal record and eventually Iker Casillas's appearance record. But with five trophies, his finest run as a player came from 2016 to 2018, when he lifted three Champions Leagues in a row under Zinedine Zidane with Real Madrid. This version of Los Blancos was one of the greatest sides in history.

Images Getty

RONALDIN

An entertainer like no other, Ronaldinho bewitched and bewildered like few have ever managed

At the World Cup in 2002, Ronaldinho stood over a free-kick 40 yards out. The England defence all expected the Brazilian to deliver a cross – and yet he scooped the ball into the back of the net to embarrass the poor David Seaman.

Plenty asked if it was a fluke – but watching Ronaldinho flourish into the best footballer on Earth in the next few years confirmed that this guy never made mistakes. The ball would stick to Ronnie's feet as he flip-flapped and dazzled with his box of samba tricks at Barcelona. And he always had a smile on his face: Ronaldinho became Lionel Messi's mentor and even towards the end of his career, when he faced Neymar in Brazil in a 5-4 epic, the master managed to put on one last show for the world.

He was simply so much fun to watch: if you love football, you love Ronaldinho.

RONALDINHO

FUN FACT

At the age of 13, Ronaldinho scored 23 goals in a single match playing against a local team.

Below Ronaldinho celebrates after scoring against Argentina in the 2005 Confederations Cup final

THE KING OF SKILLS

Ronaldinho was arguably the most entertaining player of the modern age, performing tricks and flicks for his adoring audience. In one advert for Nike, he performed keepy-uppies before hitting a crossbar from 40 yards out, while in others, he displayed his incredible stepover talents. In games, he was capable of the spectacular, too: against Chelsea, for example, he swivelled his hips before burying the ball in the corner of the net. Whatever the occasion, he always put on a show.

HO

BIO

Date of birth: 21 March 1980
Birthplace: Porto Alegre, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.82m (6'0")
Position: Midfielder
Previous teams: Grêmio (1998-2001), Paris Saint-Germain (2001-03), Barcelona (2003-08), AC Milan (2008-11), Flamengo (2011-12), Atlético Mineiro (2012-14), Querétaro (2014-15), Fluminese (2015)
Number: 10

MAJOR HONOURS

2x La Liga
1x Copa América
1x Copa Libertadores
1x UEFA Champions League
1x Serie A
1x FIFA World Cup
1x Ballon d'Or

STATS & RECORDS

120 – goals and assists in 145 La Liga games

1.0 – number of goals/assists per game at World Cup 2002

80,000 – attendance at the Bernabéu when Real Madrid fans applauded Ronaldinho off the field in 2005

Images Getty

DIEGO MARADONA

Adored, abhorred but never ignored, Maradona was an icon whose legacy is still alive today

In one game against England in 1986, Diego Maradona showed the brilliance and the naughtiness of his character. First, he punched the ball over Peter Shilton for Argentina's first goal – before running the length of the pitch to double his tally, in one of the greatest goals ever seen.

Maradona would become defined as a godlike genius with a devil on his shoulder. Many who watched him called him the most naturally talented footballer of all time: he transformed Argentina into a force on the world stage and single-handedly won Napoli trophies. But he wasn't without his devilish streak, fighting opponents at Barcelona and receiving two bans for drug abuse.

Many adored Maradona despite his troubles, simply for being an attacker who could bring such joy to the football pitch. A true individualist who inspired and wowed, he still has legions of followers to this day.

FUN FACT

Maradona is the most-fouled player at a World Cup: 53, in 1986.



Right Diego Maradona celebrates with the World Cup trophy in 1986

LEGEND

DIEGO MARADONA



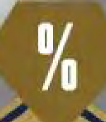
BIO

Date of birth: 30 October 1960
Birthplace: Lanús, Argentina
Nationality: Argentine
Height: 1.65m (5'5")
Position: Forward
Teams: Argentinos Juniors (1976-81), Boca Juniors (1981-82), Barcelona (1982-84), Napoli (1984-91), Sevilla (1992-93), Newell's Old Boys (1993-94), Boca Juniors (1995-97)
Number: 10



MAJOR HONOURS

2x Serie A
1x UEFA Cup
1x FIFA World Cup
1x Copa del Rey
1x Coppa Italia



STATS & RECORDS

293 – career goals from attacking midfield

0.96 – goals/assists per game in Napoli's 1989-90 league-winning season

10 – goals and assists in seven games at World Cup 1986

Images Getty



FUN FACT

Gary Lineker once claimed his first reaction to Maradona's 'Goal of the Century' was to applaud.

THE HAND OF GOD

In 1986 against England at the World Cup in Mexico, Maradona became a villain in English history forever. While jumping for a cross, he reached at the same moment as goalkeeper Peter Shilton and punched the ball into the net. The referee and his linesman failed to see it: and at a time of Anglo-Argentine tension following the Falklands War, it ignited a fire.



GOAL OF THE CENTURY

Minutes after Maradona handled the ball over Shilton to score for Argentina, he produced a moment of genius. Picking up the ball in his own half, the No.10 danced through English opponents on a pitch that shifted as he dribbled, slaloming past defenders to slot the ball into the net and send his side into the next round. The first goal was contentious: the second might be the greatest ever scored.



FACE OF NAPLES



Maradona would arrive at Napoli with the club nowhere near competing for trophies – yet he'd transform it almost single-handedly. With the Argentine leading them, Napoli won their first ever Serie A in 1987, sparking a carnival in the city of Naples. Maradona would never be forgotten for what he achieved there, with his portrait painted across the city and his No.10 retired once he left.

EXPELLED FROM THE WORLD CUP

Maradona's last goal for Argentina was one that came in disgrace. The legendary figure netted against Greece and turned to the nearest television camera, his eyes bulging. The attacker, who struggled with addiction, was sent home after failing a drug test, with his international career ending on a sour note – but he still retired as Argentina's greatest player in the 1990s.





FUN FACT

There's a church dedicated to Maradona in Buenos Aires, that celebrates his birthday.

Images Getty

XAVI HERNÁNDEZ

Barcelona and Spain's pass master won it all and helped define an entire way of playing

For a while, from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, no player embodied the way football was played at the highest level better than Xavi Hernández. The metronome at the heart of Barcelona's midfield made his debut as a more attack-minded teenager, but found his calling playing deeper, dictating tempo and passing with a precision that has rarely been matched before or since. As Barcelona and 'tiki-taka' rose to the greatest of heights domestically and in Europe, Xavi was the conductor who allowed those around him to flourish.

With his national team, Xavi was once again the fulcrum, as he and his Barça teammates translated their possession-above-all style to the world stage. Here too, he had unprecedented success as Spain became the most dominant international side of the century, winning two European Championships and a World Cup. Through it all, at the very centre, Xavi passed and moved, passed and moved.

FUN FACT

Xavi was named player of the tournament following Spain's win at UEFA Euro 2008.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND PASSES

Before Euro 2008, Spain had never won a major tournament, but Xavi helped usher in a new era of Spanish dominance. It was his perfectly weighted through ball to Fernando Torres that unlocked Germany in the 2008 final, and four years later he found Jordi Alba and Torres in a 4-0 demolition of Italy. In doing so, Xavi became the first player to assist a goal in two European Championship finals.



XAVI

XAVI HERNÁNDEZ



BIO

Date of birth: 25 January 1980
Birthplace: Terrassa, Spain
Nationality: Spanish
Height: 1.70m (5'7")
Position: Midfielder
Previous teams: Barcelona (1998-2015), Al Sadd (2015-19)
Number: 6



MAJOR HONOURS

4x UEFA Champions League

2x UEFA European Championship

1x FIFA World Cup

8x La Liga

3x Copa del Rey



STATS & RECORDS

767 – appearances for Barcelona (second all-time behind Messi)

3 – third-place Ballon d'Or rankings

136 – most passes attempted in a single Euro match

Images Getty

TOP 10 MIDFIELDERS

Meet the midfield maestros who boss the game from the middle of the park

Midfielders are the all-rounders of football. Striding across the middle of the park, they need to tackle, pass, dribble and shoot. Some are pure box-to-box players with endless stamina. Others have a more specialised skillset, dominating as a defensive midfielder or going on the offensive as an attacking midfielder. The selection of players in this shortlist cover all aspects of midfield play between them, from A to Zico.



JOHAN CRUYFF

NATIONALITY Dutch
ACTIVE 1964-84
TEAMS Ajax, Barcelona, Los Angeles Aztecs, Washington Diplomats, Levante, Feyenoord
MAJOR HONOURS 3x European Cup, 9x Eredivisie, 1x La Liga, 6x Dutch Cup, 1x Copa del Rey, 3x Ballon d'Or

The embodiment of the Total Football approach that helped the previously unfancied Netherlands reach the World Cup final, Cruyff was an attacking midfielder and prolific goalscorer who dropped deep. Although he picked up ten league titles as a player, Cruyff believed that his teams needed to win with style, and he perfected a feint now known as the Cruyff Turn.



MICHEL PLATINI

NATIONALITY French
ACTIVE 1972-87
TEAMS Nancy, Saint-Étienne, Juventus
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 1x Division 1 (France), 2x Serie A, 1x European Cup, 1x Coppa Italia, 1x Coupe de France, 1 European Cup winners' Cup, 3x Ballon d'Or

Although his reputation has been dented thanks to the way his tenure as president of UEFA ended, Platini's career as a player saw him hailed as one of the greatest attacking midfielders in history. Platini won three Ballon d'Or awards and scored nine goals during France's victorious run in the 1984 Euros.



XAVI

NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 1997-2019
TEAMS Barcelona, Al Sadd
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 2x UEFA European Championship, 8x La Liga, 4x UEFA Champions League, 3x Copa del Rey

Pass master Xavi was the metronome who ran Barcelona's tiki-taka system, passing the ball around 100 times a game as a deep-lying playmaker. Opponents had little option but to chase the game as Xavi repeatedly found space, received the ball, then instantly looked to pass. During the 2010 World Cup, Xavi had a remarkable 91% pass success rate.

LOTHAR MATTHÄUS

NATIONALITY German
ACTIVE 1978-2000
TEAMS 1. FC Herzogenaurach, Borussia Mönchengladbach, Bayern Munich, Inter Milan, Metrostars
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA European Championship, 7x Bundesliga, 1x Serie A, 2x UEFA Cup, 2x German Cup, 1x Ballon d'Or

Matthäus played in five World Cups and four European Championships, winning one of each, and earning a record 150 German caps. He was a box-to-box midfielder who operated as a sweeper in later years, but scored more than 200 goals over his career and won the Ballon d'Or in 1990.





DIEGO MARADONA

NATIONALITY Argentine
ACTIVE 1976-97
TEAMS Argentinos Juniors, Boca Juniors, Barcelona, Napoli, Sevilla, Newell's Old Boys
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 2x Serie A, 1x UEFA Cup, 1x Copa del Rey, 1x Coppa Italia

An enigmatic genius who's hailed as a hero in his native Argentina despite courting controversy and serving a drugs ban, Maradona slalomed around tackles from his favoured right wing. His best goal came in the 1986 World Cup quarter-final against England, although the same match also saw Maradona score with a deliberate handball.



ANDREA PIRLO

NATIONALITY Italian
ACTIVE 1995-2017
TEAMS Brescia, Inter Milan, Reggina, AC Milan, Juventus, New York City
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 6x Serie A, 2x UEFA Champions League, 2x Coppa Italia

A playmaker who liked to sit just in front of his back line, Pirlo's precise passing and extraordinary vision helped him to a bucketful of assists during his long career – the bulk of which came with AC Milan and Juventus. Pirlo was also a free-kick specialist, able to score or serve up a perfectly weighted high ball into the box.



ANDRÉS INIESTA

NATIONALITY Spanish
ACTIVE 2002-23
TEAMS Barcelona, Vissel Kobe, Emirates
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 2x UEFA European Championship, 9x La Liga, 4x UEFA Champions League, 6x Copa del Rey

Barcelona's tiki-taka golden era didn't just feature one all-time great midfielder – it had two. Iniesta teamed up with Xavi to win with the Catalan giants, and they were just as successful with Spain. Iniesta's close control and balance was unsurpassed, and he loved to wrong-foot opponents.



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

NATIONALITY French
ACTIVE 1989-2006
TEAMS Cannes, Bordeaux, Juventus, Real Madrid
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA European Championship, 2x Serie A, 1x La Liga, 1x UEFA Champions League, 1x Ballon d'Or

An attacking midfielder who kept the ball and set up forwards with can't-miss opportunities, Zidane's pirouettes bamboozled defenders. He was at his best in clutch situations, scoring crucial goals in the 1998 World Cup final and a stunning volley in the 2002 Champions League final.



BOBBY CHARLTON

NATIONALITY English
ACTIVE 1956-1976
TEAMS Manchester United, Preston North End
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 3x English First Division, 1x European Cup, 1x FA Cup, 1x Ballon d'Or

The pinnacle of Charlton's career came in 1966, when his England team won the World Cup and he won the Ballon d'Or, but Charlton played at a consistently high level for Manchester United for 16 seasons. He survived the Munich air crash in 1958 and won the European Cup ten years later.



ZICO

NATIONALITY Brazilian
ACTIVE 1971-94
TEAMS Flamengo, Udinese, Kashima Antlers
MAJOR HONOURS 1x Copa Libertadores

Zico was known as the 'White Pelé' for good reason. He scored 48 goals in 71 games for the Brazilian national team – an impressive rate for a midfielder. He also picked up several medals with Flamengo, including a Copa Libertadores, and netted more than 500 goals in 731 games, making him the club's all-time top scorer.

Images Getty

MARTA

Often regarded as the female GOAT, Marta is an icon that transcends gender for what she's achieved

Marta might be the most important figure in the history of women's football. At a time in which the women's game has been steadily growing, she has done so much for young girls getting into the sport – but like many other young women, she had to leave her home in order to pursue her dreams.

Marta became an icon in Europe, where she won lots of trophies and awards and was lauded as 'the female Ronaldo'. But even now, the forward is still going strong, scoring goals and captivating millions with a typically Brazilian style of play that relies on expressing yourself with a ball at your feet.

Almost every woman who's made it in football since owes a little to Marta as the first true superstar of women's football. Despite all the challenges she faced as a woman, she overcame them – and she's a hero in her home country for how she reached the top of the game.

FUN FACT

Marta holds dual citizenship with Sweden, due to living there so long.



EUROPEAN CHAMPION

The UEFA Women's Cup – the precursor to the Women's Champions League – was still in its infancy when Marta took it by storm. It was in the 2003-04 season that the Brazilian inspired the Swedish side Umeå in the final over two legs, with three goals in an eight-goal aggregate victory. Marta added the South American flair that tore Frankfurt apart to win Umeå's second title in the competition.



BIO

Date of birth: 19 February 1986
Birthplace: Dois Riachos, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.62m (5'4")
Position: Forward
Teams: Vasco da Gama (2000-02), Santa Cruz (2002-04), Umeå (2004-08) Los Angeles Sol (2009), Santos (2009-10), Gold Pride (2010), Santos (2011), Western New York Flash (2011), Tyresö (2012-14), Rosengård (2014-17), Orlando Pride (2017-present)
Number: 10



MAJOR HONOURS

1x UEFA Women's Cup

1x Copa Libertadores

7x Damallsvenskan



STATS & RECORDS

17 – most goals at the Women's World Cup

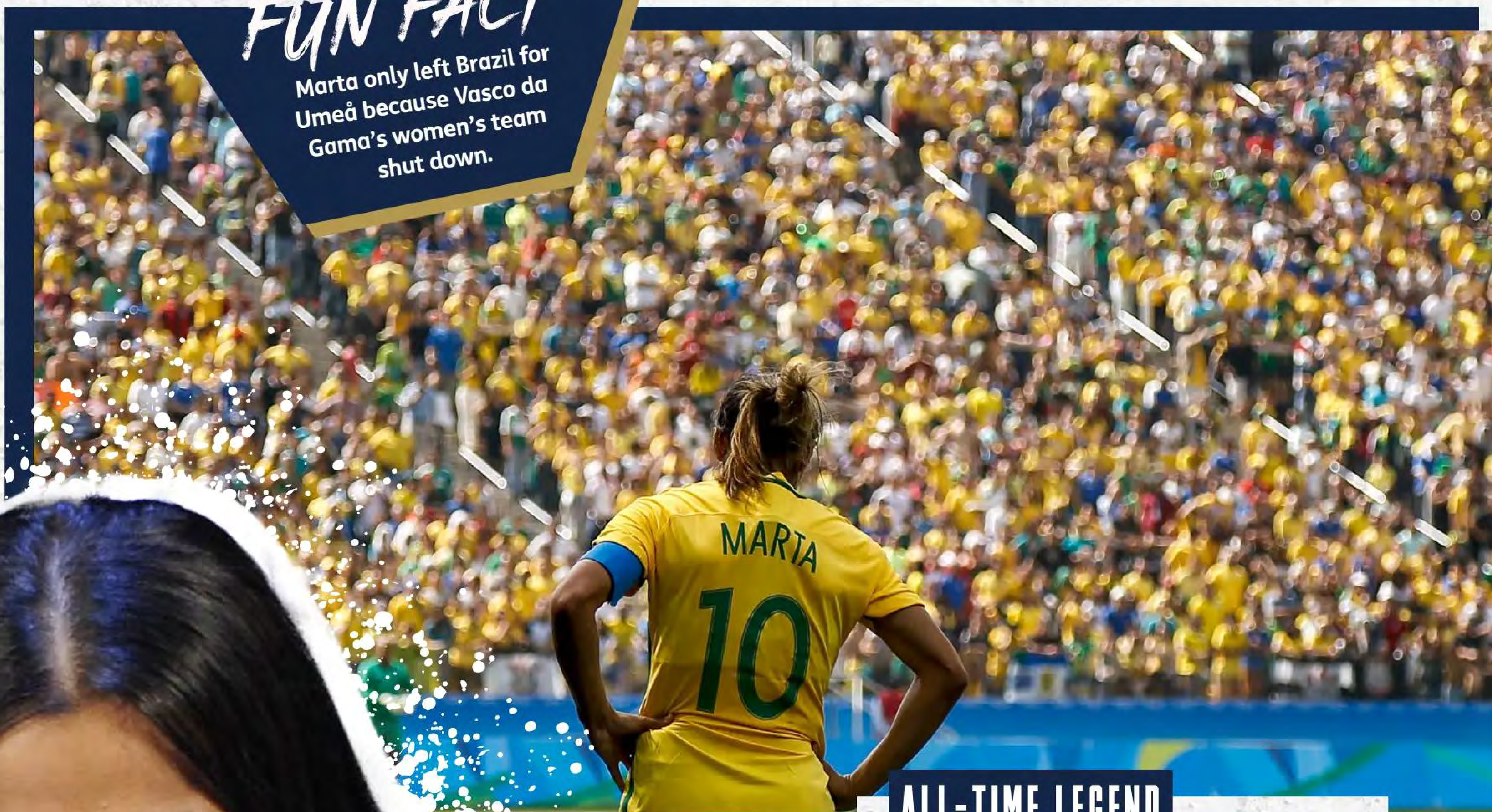
5 – first player of any gender to score at five World Cups

115 – most goals for Brazil

Images Getty

FUN FACT

Marta only left Brazil for Umeå because Vasco da Gama's women's team shut down.



ALL-TIME LEGEND

Although she was jeered throughout the 2011 Women's World Cup, Marta wrote her name in history with another four strikes at the tournament to move level with Birgit Prinz as the all-time top scorer in the competition. She moved clear of Prinz four years later and Marta's longevity was established when she was still leading Brazil at the 2023 tournament.

THE BEST ON EARTH

The Santos women's team of 2009 played a stunning brand of football. In a 9-0 Copa Libertadores final victory over Universidad Autónoma, Marta was at the heart of the thrashing in her return to Brazil – and in just 14 games on loan at Santos, she scored 26 goals. It led to her being named FIFA Women's World Player of the Year in 2009.



A REAL OLYMPIAN

Women's football has a closer relationship with the Olympic Games than the men's game – and arguably no one has done more for football at the Olympics than Marta. Despite only receiving two silver medals, Marta's amazing career has seen her net in five straight Games, with the record coming with a brace in a 5-0 win against China in Tokyo, in 2021.

FUN FACT

Marta was the first woman immortalised on the Maracanã's Walk of Fame for legendary Brazilians.

Images Getty

RAFAEL LEÃO

He's lightning fast and an incredible finisher: no one can stop Rafael Leão in full flight

LEÃO

RAFAEL LEÃO

FUN FACT
Leão means 'lion' and he started his career at Sporting, who are nicknamed... the lions!



WORLD-CLASS PROVIDER

Leão is known for his instinctive finishing and incredible pace to score goals – but he turned into the assister when Milan won their first title for 11 years in 2022. The Portuguese speedster registered three assists as Milan beat Sassuolo 3-0 away from home to seal the Scudetto, with Leão showing a less selfish side of his game.

After leading Milan to their first title in over a decade, Rafael Leão has emerged as one of the most explosive footballers on Earth in the past couple of years. After breaking through the Sporting setup, a move to Lille saw Leão impress in his sole season in French football – and from there, he's gone on to become the face of a European giant at the San Siro.

The Portuguese winger is stunning at his best, with cheetah-like speed and the strength of a rugby player used to bulldoze past opponents and score with ease. Leão plays with swagger and has become the jewel in Milan's crown, taking the No.10 shirt and becoming the Rossoneri's – and Italian football's – biggest superstar. At just 25, he's already one of the best attackers on the planet and has gone to a World Cup with Portugal. He's primed for a huge career.



RIGHT Leão, now in the No.10 shirt, takes on Newcastle United in the Champions League with Milan



BIO

Date of birth: 10 June 1999
Birthplace: Almada, Portugal
Nationality: Portuguese
Height: 1.88m (6'2")
Position: Forward
Teams: Sporting (2017-18), Lille (2018-19), AC Milan (2019-present)
Number: 10



MAJOR HONOURS

1x
Serie A



STATS & RECORDS

21 – goals and assists as Milan won Serie A in 2021-22

6 SECONDS – Leão scored the fastest goal in Serie A history in 2019

186 – the third-most dribbles in Europe in the 2021-22 season

MOHAMED SALAH

How the endearing Egyptian helped bring the glory days back to Anfield

Some players are genuinely hard to dislike – Mohamed Salah falls into this select band of footballers. You'll rarely see him squaring up to other teams or confronting referees; he just quietly gets on with the business of finding the back of the net.

Overcoming early career disappointment at Chelsea, to say he firmly grabbed his second chance at Premier League football with Liverpool would be the mother of all understatements. As part of a lethal three-pronged strike force alongside Sadio Mané and Roberto Firmino, Salah made an instant impact, netting 44 goals in all competitions in his first season and winning the Golden Boot. He would repeat this feat twice more, adding a Champions League and Premier League trophy to go with this haul.

Rapid, versatile and full of industry, there are few players like Salah, who stands out even among the star-studded individuals to have graced the Anfield turf. Still a sight to behold when in full flow, he's simply one of the most joyful players to watch at the top level.

"RAPID, VERSATILE AND FULL OF INDUSTRY, THERE ARE FEW PLAYERS LIKE SALAH, WHO STANDS OUT EVEN AMONG THE STAR-STUDDED INDIVIDUALS TO HAVE GRACED THE ANFIELD TURF"



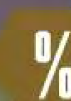
BIO

Date of birth: 15 June 1992
Birthplace: Nagrig, Egypt
Nationality: Egyptian
Height: 1.75m (5'9")
Position: Forward
Teams: Al Mokawloon Al Arab (2010-12), Basel (2012-14), Chelsea (2014-16), Roma (2016-17), Liverpool (2017-present)
Number: 11



MAJOR HONOURS

1x Premier League
1x FA Cup
1x UEFA Champions League
2x Swiss Super League



STATS & RECORDS

32 – goals scored in 2017-18 Premier League season

1st – African player to score 30 goals in a Premier League season

41 – Liverpool's all-time top Champions League goalscorer

FUN FACT

At 1.64, Salah has Liverpool's third highest games to goal ratio, behind Gordon Hodgson (1.56) and Luis Suárez (1.62).

Images Getty



FUN FACT

Salah was recognised for his charity work in 2021, winning the Sporting Inspiration Award at the Laureus Awards.

FOUR'S THE CHARM

To date, Salah has scored four hat-tricks for Liverpool, but he went one better during his excellent first season. In March 2018 against Watford at Anfield, he bookended a Firmino strike with four goals of his own as the Reds cruised to a stunning 5-0 victory.

TIME'S 100

Salah's popularity outside football was highlighted in 2019, when he graced the cover of *TIME* magazine for its TIME 100 series. Described by the article's author, English comedian John Oliver, as "a better human being than he is a footballer", it was a unique achievement for a footballer.



WONDERSTRIKE

Salah has scored some incredible goals in his time, but his 101st for Liverpool – against Manchester City on 3 October 2021 – takes some beating. Twisting and turning this way and that, he left the City defence bamboozled before blasting home. That his opponents later equalised shouldn't take the shine off it.



MOHAMED

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNER

It was only his second season before Salah was able to play his part in helping Liverpool take home European football's biggest prize. Opening the scoring from the penalty spot in the second minute, he was his usual energetic self as Liverpool put Tottenham to the sword with a 2-0 victory.



FUN FACT

A pair of Salah's boots have been on display in the British Museum.

Images Getty

Luís FIGO

From Barcelona's talisman to one of Real Madrid's greatest Galácticos, the Portuguese legend is a true icon

Some players have it all – ability, industry, the lot. Luís Figo can justifiably lay claim to being in this select band, marrying a single-minded desire for success with a willingness to devote himself entirely to his teams' fortunes. Skilful, strong, and a born leader – it's hard to deny that he really is one of the game's greats.

Along the way, he has managed to do what few players have dared: after achieving acclaim at Barcelona, he was willing to move to hated rivals Real Madrid – he was even greeted by a pig's head on one of his appearances back at the Camp Nou with his new team. At the Bernabéu, he stood out even among the rest of the Galácticos, counting the likes of Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo and David Beckham among their hallowed number.

At club level, he has won almost every honour it has been possible to attain; been crowned as the best player in the world, and galvanised Portugal into one of the world's most-admired footballing nations as part of its much-vaunted 'golden generation'.

FIGO

LUÍS FIGO



BIO

Date of birth: 4 November 1972
Birthplace: Almada, Portugal
Nationality: Portuguese
Height: 1.80m (5'11")
Position: Midfielder
Teams: Sporting Lisbon (1989-95), Barcelona (1995-2000), Real Madrid (2000-05), Inter Milan (2005-09)
Number: 7



MAJOR HONOURS

4x La Liga

4x Serie A

1x UEFA Champions League

1x Portuguese Cup

1x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup

1x Coppa Italia

2x Copa del Rey

1x Ballon d'Or



STATS & RECORDS

127 – number of caps for the Portugal national team

62 MILLION – the amount of Euros it cost Real Madrid to sign him from Barcelona, a then-world record

22 – trophies won at club level during his career

FUN FACT

Figo claims his favourite goal is the one he scored against England at Euro 2000.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNER AT LAST


While Real Madrid's famed Galácticos never quite conquered all in the manner they were expected to, Figo ultimately got what he wanted out of his controversial transfer from Barcelona. Taking on Bayer Leverkusen in the 2002 Champions League final, goals from Raúl and Zidane saw his side run out 2-1 winners. It would prove to be the high point of his time at the Bernabéu.



Images Getty; Alamy

THIERRY HENRY

He was given a bronze statue outside Arsenal's stadium – but he gave the Gunners golden moments inside



When Thierry Henry got the ball, quite often, it was already over. He was a complete forward and a showman, too: faster than just about everyone else, with incredible vision to find teammates or launch a rocket into the net. But Henry also had an eye for the special: his flicks and tricks became part of his charm, while his ice-cold celebrations endeared him to millions.

Originally an athletic winger, Arsène Wenger signed Henry to become a deadly striker for Arsenal: the rest is history. The Frenchman scored 175 Premier League goals, won every trophy worth lifting and inspired the world by making football fun. "Thierry Henry could take the ball in the middle of the park and score a goal that no one else in the world could score," Wenger said of his protégé. He terrorised defenders and bewitched fans alike.



BIO

Date of birth: 17 August 1977
Birthplace: Paris, France
Nationality: French
Height: 1.88m (6'2")
Position: Forward
Teams: Monaco (1994-99), Juventus (1999), Arsenal (1999-2007), Barcelona (2007-10), New York Red Bulls (2010-14), Arsenal (loan – 2012)
Number: 14



MAJOR HONOURS

2x Premier League
2x FA Cup
2x La Liga
1x Ligue 1
1x Copa del Rey
1x UEFA Champions League
1x FIFA World Cup
1x UEFA European Championship



STATS & RECORDS

228 – most all-time goals for Arsenal

20 – joint-most assists in a Premier League season

4 – most Premier League Golden Boot wins

Images Getty

FUN FACT
Henry has the most goals scored in Premier League history… on a Friday.

FOREVER INVINCIBLE

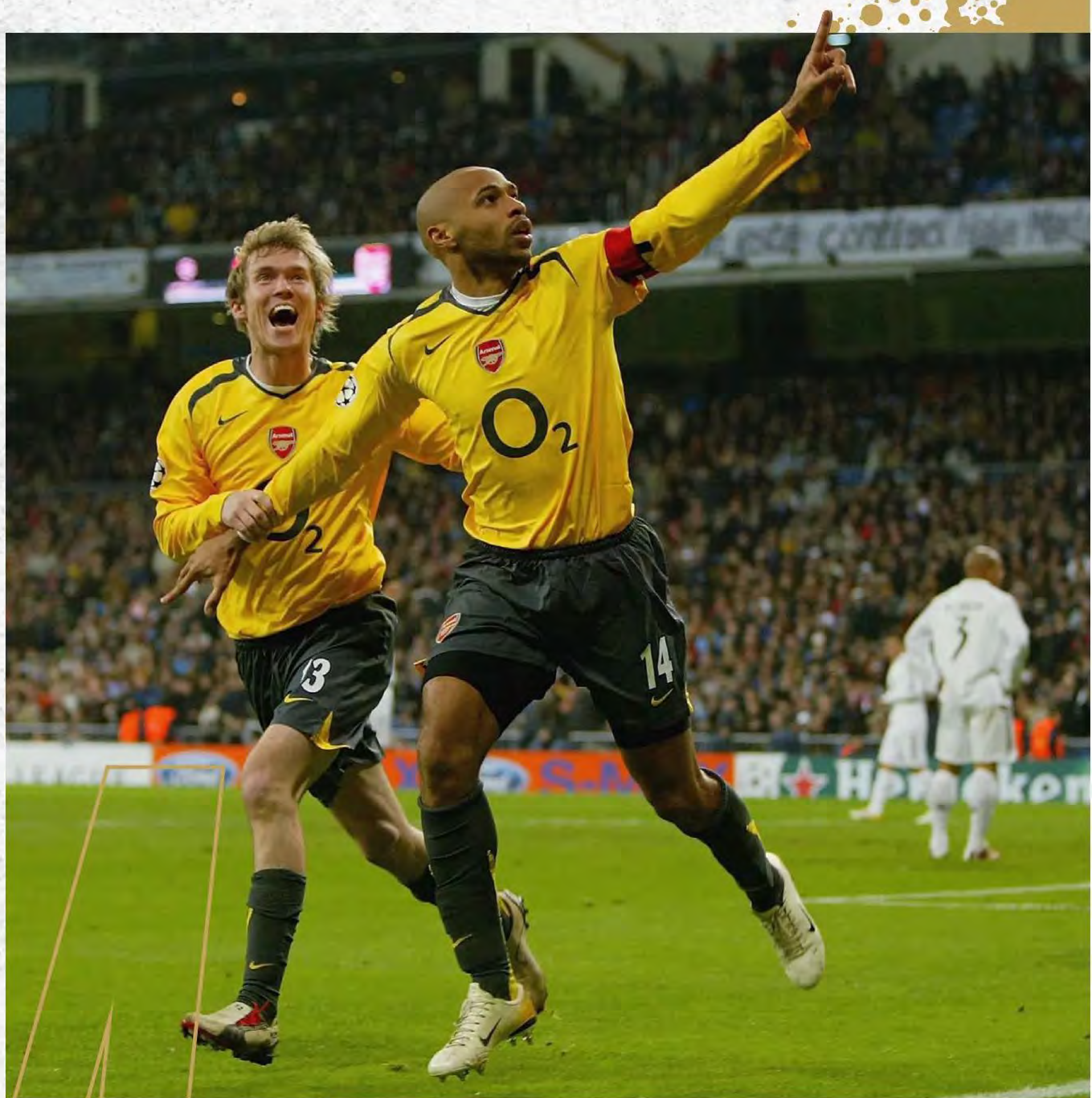
Henry was the superstar of Arsenal's Invincible season, in which Arsène Wenger's side won the title without losing. Henry scored 30 goals and was arguably the best player in the world. His most special moments came against Liverpool, as he netted a hat-trick to help Arsenal come from behind to preserve their unbeaten status in April. Arsenal won the title against bitter rivals Tottenham, as Henry and company celebrated on the White Hart Lane pitch.

KING OF THE WORLD

Henry was France's top scorer at the 1998 World Cup, scoring three goals. But the 20-year-old would never get a chance to play in the final – he was stripped and ready to come on as a substitute but manager Aimé Jacquet changed his mind after defender Marcel Desailly was sent off. In the Euro 2000 final against Italy, Henry was the man of the match, more than making up for his earlier disappointment.

GALACTICO SLAYER

In 2005-06, Henry became the captain of Arsenal and led the club to their first-ever Champions League final. The highlight, of course, was a stunning individual goal away to Real Madrid, as he beat three defenders in a long run before scoring the winner. The Gunners would lose the final to Barcelona – but will always fondly remember that night in the Bernabéu when Henry gave them a moment of genius.



EUROPEAN GLORY AT LAST

Henry finally got his Champions League win in 2009 – but had to leave Arsenal to do it. The Frenchman joined Barcelona in 2007, playing alongside Ronaldinho and Lionel Messi in a star-studded line-up. In Pep Guardiola's first season in charge, Henry netted 26 goals, as Barça won a whopping six trophies. The Champions League victory would have been all the sweeter for Henry as it came against Manchester United – rivals from his time at Arsenal.

FUN FACT

No one has scored more goals at a single ground than Henry: 114 at Highbury.

Images Getty

TOP 10 FORWARDS

From the Galloping Major to the Blond Arrow, these are the players who goalkeepers feared more than any other

Modern football fans are split into two camps: Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi? But before these modern superstars came a host of legendary forwards. Some were outright strikers who played closest to the opponent's goal. Others were more creative, deep-lying playmakers whose primary job was to supply their strike partner with chances or to attack from the wing. Whatever their particular style, this is the best batch of goalscorers in football history.



CRISTIANO RONALDO

NATIONALITY Portuguese
ACTIVE 2002-present
TEAMS Sporting Lisbon, Manchester United, Real Madrid, Juventus, Al Nassr
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 3x Premier League, 2x La Liga, 2x Serie A, 5x UEFA Champions League, 1x FA Cup, 2x Copa del Rey, 1x Coppa Italia, 5x Ballon d'Or

CR7 has enjoyed success at every stop of his career. He's the first player to finish as top scorer in the English, Spanish and Italian leagues, and has won five Ballon d'Or awards. During a long-lasting career he's had more than 1,220 appearances and holds the record for most goals in competitive games with more than 885.



PELÉ

NATIONALITY Brazilian
ACTIVE 1956-77
TEAMS Santos, New York Cosmos
MAJOR HONOURS 3x FIFA World Cup, 2x Copa Libertadores

With a staggering 1,279 goals in 1,363 appearances, Pelé's goalscoring record is frankly amazing. He could belt them in with either foot and was superb at anticipating his opponents' moves. Pelé is most familiar to European fans due to his exploits at the World Cup, but he also dominated with Santos in the Brazilian league.

GEORGE BEST

NATIONALITY Northern Irish
ACTIVE 1963-83
TEAMS Manchester United, Stockport County, Cork Celtic, Los Angeles Aztecs, Fulham, Fort Lauderdale Strikers, Hibernian, San Jose Earthquakes, AFC Bournemouth
MAJOR HONOURS 2x English First Division, 1x European Cup, 1x Ballon d'Or

A player who lived up to his name, Best was a skilful winger who terrorised defenders when he ran at them. His handsome looks, moptop hair and playboy lifestyle saw him nicknamed 'the Fifth Beatle', and Best was the first player who was as famous (even infamous) off the field as he was on it.



FERENC PUSKÁS

NATIONALITY Hungarian
ACTIVE 1943-66
TEAMS Budapest Honvéd, Real Madrid
MAJOR HONOURS 5x La Liga, 3x European Cup

The Galloping Major was the target man in the Hungary side that finished as runners-up in the 1954 World Cup, and he scored 84 goals in 85 games for his home country. He chose to escape from Hungary's communist regime while his club were on a world tour and joined Real Madrid for a successful eight-season stint.





MARCO VAN BASTEN

NATIONALITY Dutch
ACTIVE 1981-95
TEAMS Ajax, AC Milan
MAJOR HONOURS 1x UEFA European Championship, 3x Eredivisie, 4x Serie A, 2x European Cup, 3x Dutch Cup, 3x Ballon d'Or

Van Basten's close ball control was among the finest ever seen in a striker, but he's best known for scoring a spectacular volley as the Netherlands won the 1988 European Championship final. His career came to a premature end at the age of 28 thanks to recurrent ankle trouble, but he still scored more than 240 goals for club and country.



EUSÉBIO

NATIONALITY Portuguese
ACTIVE 1957-79
TEAMS Sporting Lourenço Marques, Benfica, Boston Minutemen, Monterrey, Toronto Metros-Croatia, Beira-Mar, Las Vegas Quicksilvers, União de Tomar, New Jersey Americans
MAJOR HONOURS 11x Portuguese Primeira Liga, 1x European Cup, 1x Ballon d'Or

The player known as the 'Black Panther' may have travelled widely during his career, but he's best known for his 14 seasons with Benfica, where he scored 473 goals in 440 games. Eusébio's biggest asset was his pace that left defenders in his wake.



GERD MÜLLER

NATIONALITY German
ACTIVE 1963-81
TEAMS 1861 Nördlingen, Bayern Munich, Fort Lauderdale Strikers
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 1x UEFA European Championship, 4x Bundesliga, 3x European Cup, 4x German Cup, 1x European Cup Winners' Cup, 1x Ballon d'Or

Müller has the rare achievement of scoring more goals for his country than he has caps – 68 goals in 62 games – and he helped Germany to win the World Cup in 1974. Even that was overshadowed by his performance in the 1970 tournament, when Müller got ten goals in six games.



LIONEL MESSI

NATIONALITY Argentine
ACTIVE 2004-present
TEAMS Barcelona, Paris Saint-Germain, Inter Miami
MAJOR HONOURS 1x FIFA World Cup, 4x UEFA Champions League, 10x La Liga, 2x Ligue 1, 1x Copa América, 1x Leagues Cup, 8x Ballon d'Or

Messi has won just about every major trophy in world football, but his personal trophy cabinet is also overflowing thanks to his individual accolades. No player has more than his eight Ballon d'Or awards. Though lacking in height, Messi more than makes up for it with agility and ball control.



ALFREDO DI STÉFANO

NATIONALITY Argentine
ACTIVE 1945-66
TEAMS River Plate, Huracán, Millonarios, Real Madrid, Espanyol
MAJOR HONOURS 5x European Cup, 8x La Liga, 1x Copa América, 2x Ballon d'Or

The 'Blond Arrow' won many league and cup trophies during his time in the Argentine and Colombian leagues, but it was when he signed with Real Madrid and helped them to dominate in Europe that he was at his best. He scored in five different European Cup victories and was a two-time Ballon d'Or winner.



RONALDO

NATIONALITY Brazilian
ACTIVE 1993-2011
TEAMS Cruzeiro, PSV, Barcelona, Inter Milan, Real Madrid, AC Milan, Corinthians
MAJOR HONOURS 2x FIFA World Cup, 1x La Liga, 1x UEFA Cup, 1x UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, 1x Copa del Rey, 1x Dutch Cup, 2x Copa América, 2x Ballon d'Or

Ronaldo was the youngest member of Brazil's 1994 World Cup-winning squad and top scorer when they won again in 2002. He nearly added a third title, but Brazil lost the 1998 World Cup final, although Ronaldo was awarded the Golden Ball as player of the tournament thanks to his all-round skill as a striker.

FUN FACT
In a 2016 study, Zidane was named as the greatest French footballer of all time.

ZINEDINE ZIDANE

A midfield artist who left his mark – one way or another – on the biggest games in football

There are great players and there are players who deliver great moments. Zinedine Zidane was both. Tall and elegant on the ball, with flawless technique and a ruthless streak to his game, 'Zizou' made waves in France with Cannes and then Bordeaux before his first major move – to Juventus in 1996. Primarily an attacking midfielder who excelled in moving the ball forward from deep and setting up his teammates, Zidane often appeared nonchalant on the ball – something about his languid movement and the ease with which he operated in the tightest of spaces – but in moments of need he would always step up. Finals were his preferred stage, for Juve and later Real Madrid – who made him the most expensive player in history – but above all for France. No player has been as decisive as Zidane on the international stage since Diego Maradona.



"ZIDANE OFTEN APPEARED NONCHALANT ON THE BALL, BUT IN MOMENTS OF NEED HE WOULD ALWAYS STEP UP"



Right Taken in 1999 at the Juventus Stadium in Italy, this publicity portrait was for Adidas



BIO

Date of birth: 23 June 1972
Birthplace: Marseille, France
Nationality: French
Height: 1.85m (6'1")
Position: Midfielder
Teams: Cannes (1989-92), Bordeaux (1992-96), Juventus (1996-2001), Real Madrid (2001-06)
Number: 5



MAJOR HONOURS

1x FIFA World Cup
1x UEFA European Championship
2x Serie A
1x La Liga
1x Ballon d'Or
1x UEFA Champions League



STATS & RECORDS

2 – joint-most World Cup red cards

150 BILLION – amount Real Madrid paid in Italian lire for Zidane

3 – first manager to win three consecutive Champions League titles

Images Getty

THE WORLD AT HIS FEET

He was already a star by then, but the 1998 World Cup transformed Zidane into a phenomenon. A mixed start to the tournament saw him sent off in the group stage, but he returned for the latter stages and stepped up in the final against Brazil. Two towering headers – another underrated aspect of his game – put the match to bed, and inspired France to their first World Cup title on home soil.

FUN FACT

Zidane is of Algerian descent and was eligible to play for both France and Algeria.

Left Zidane celebrates his second goal in the 1998 World Cup final, a performance that helped cement his position as one of the greats

A THUNDERBOLT IN GLASGOW

Any goal to win a Champions League final is special, but Zidane's in 2002 was a work of art. With Madrid level with Bayer Leverkusen at Hampden Park, Roberto Carlos looped a cross in from the left. It took an age to drop, but Zidane was waiting. He swung his weaker left foot and made perfect contact, arrowing a volley into the top-left corner. Even Zizou knew it was special, as his emphatic celebration showed.

A MOMENT OF MADNESS

With Zidane, there is brilliance and there is madness. The 2006 World Cup final demonstrated both these elements in full. Zizou scored an early penalty and set about dictating play as France looked for a winning goal against Italy. Then in a stunning twist, he headbutted Italian defender Marco Materazzi in the chest, earning a straight red card. France would go on to lose on penalties. It would be Zidane's final professional match.

FUN FACT

Zidane has four sons – Enzo, Luca, Théo and Elyaz – all of whom are former or current professional footballers.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

So often, incredible players fail to translate their skills to the role of manager. Not so for Zidane. In two spells as head coach of Real Madrid, he delivered two league titles and an unprecedented three straight Champions Leagues, displaying a tactical flexibility and management skills that few could have predicted. Whatever role he takes next, expectations will be sky high.



Images Getty

FRANZ BECKENBAUER

With countless trophies, arguably no one shaped German football more than 'Der Kaiser'

LEGEND

FRANZ BECKENBAUER

Perhaps no one in football history has shaped the role of a defender more than the legendary Franz Beckenbauer, who is still adored by fans who watched him play. The iconic German broke through in the 60s at his hometown side, Bayern Munich, was captain for his club and country and became a byword in his country for success, with a cabinet of countless medals by the end of his career.

While plenty of defenders had brawn, Beckenbauer had brains to match his physicality. 'Der Kaiser' was able to intercept and read the game, defining the role of a sweeper in European football. He could pass, and he was a leader, too, capable of organising his team – and when he praised countryman Jürgen Klopp in 2019, the Liverpool boss claimed it felt like getting a knighthood. Beckenbauer might be the most important figure in his nation's footballing history.



LEFT Bayern fans pay tribute to Beckenbauer before their match against Real Madrid in April 2024

FUN FACT

Won three straight European Cups with Bayern: only Ajax and Real Madrid have done the same.



LEFT Beckenbauer's skill on the pitch was a joy to watch

GOLD AT LAST

After losing the 1966 final at Wembley to England, Beckenbauer and four teammates became the first players to win a gold, silver and bronze at the World Cup in 1974. Johan Cruyff's much-fancied Netherlands side were favourites at the Olympiastadion – but after going behind to a penalty, Beckenbauer lifted the Jules Rimet trophy thanks to a winning goal from Bayern teammate Gerd Müller in Munich.



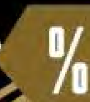
BIO

Date of birth: 11 September 1945
Birthplace: Munich, Germany
Nationality: German
Height: 1.81m (5'11")
Position: Defender
Teams: Bayern Munich (1964-77), New York Cosmos (1977-80), Hamburg (1980-82), New York Cosmos (1983)
Number: 5



MAJOR HONOURS

- 5x Bundesliga
- 3x European Cup
- 4x German Cup
- 1x FIFA World Cup
- 1x European Cup Winners' Cup
- 2x Ballon d'Or
- 1x UEFA European Championship



STATS & RECORDS

3 – Beckenbauer is one of three men to win the World Cup as a player and manager

2 – the only man to appear in two Euros finals and two World Cup finals

584 – appearances for Bayern Munich

Images Getty

VINÍCIUS JR

The blockbuster Brazilian smashed records as a teenager – and could go down as a legend of the game

Vinícius Jr joined Real Madrid for a lot of money and took a long time to settle. There were a few who doubted whether he would ever reach the top – but he's proven a lot of people wrong.

The winger scores and assists at a fantastic rate but he's a throwback, too: he loves showing off his incredible skills and speed and he inspires fans with how much he enjoys his football. Vini Jr has quietly become one of the most exciting players in the world for his control, speed and finishing and, following in a long line of Brazilian stars at Real Madrid, he's carved a name for himself as a fan favourite.

And on top of his football, Vini Jr does a lot for charity, fights racism and is involved with humanitarian work back in his native Brazil. He's the kind of player that every fan would love to have in their team.

FUN FACT

Vini Jr was the first player born in the 21st century to represent Real Madrid.



BIO

Date of birth: 12 July 2000
Birthplace: São Gonçalo, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.76m (5'9")
Position: Forward
Teams: Flamengo (2017-18), Real Madrid (2018-present)
Number: 7



MAJOR HONOURS

1x Copa del Rey

1x UEFA Champions League

3x La Liga



STATS & RECORDS

11 – goals and assists en route to his first Champions League title

46,000,000 – in Euros, the most money paid for a footballer under 19 at the time

2 DAYS – time between his senior debut and his first major contract

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE CONQUEROR

While Karim Benzema had been Real Madrid's talisman during their 2021-22 Champions League campaign, it was Vini Jr who made the decisive difference in the final in Paris. With the winning goal against Liverpool, the Brazilian showed that he was the man for the big occasion for Los Blancos, after a stunning performance against Manchester City in the semi-finals, too.

ON THE WORLD STAGE

With Neymar ruled out, all eyes were on Vini Jr on Brazil's left wing in the knockout stages of the 2022 World Cup. The forward was one of the key men in a 4-1 thrashing of South Korea, scoring his first World Cup goal and helping to orchestrate a devastating performance in which the samba spirit of the Seleção was showcased to the world.



HAT-TRICK HERO

Any Real Madrid player who scores against Barcelona instantly becomes a hero, no matter the game: in the 2024 Supercopa de España in Saudi Arabia, however, Vini Jr tore the Catalans apart. The Brazilian netted a memorable first-half hat-trick against the oldest enemy, writing his name in the record books as one of a few to have scored three goals in El Clásico.

FUN FACT

Vini Jr became the youngest overseas player to score in El Clásico back in 2019-20.



THE SOCRATES AWARD

In 2023, Vini Jr was the recipient of the Socrates Award at the Ballon d'Or ceremony, which recognises footballers who show commitment to charity and social projects. Not only has the Real Madrid star been a prominent voice in football regarding discrimination, he set up a foundation in 2021 to help underprivileged children in his home country. "I'm so happy to win this award and to be able to help so many favelas in Brazil," he said at the ceremony.

SAM KERR



Back-flipping, free-scoring Kerr is a superstar of women's football – and has become the face of a nation for her goals

With women's football growing in popularity, perhaps no one has done more for the game's entertainment factor than Sam Kerr. It's not just that she performs somersaults when she scores – it's that she scores a hell of a lot.

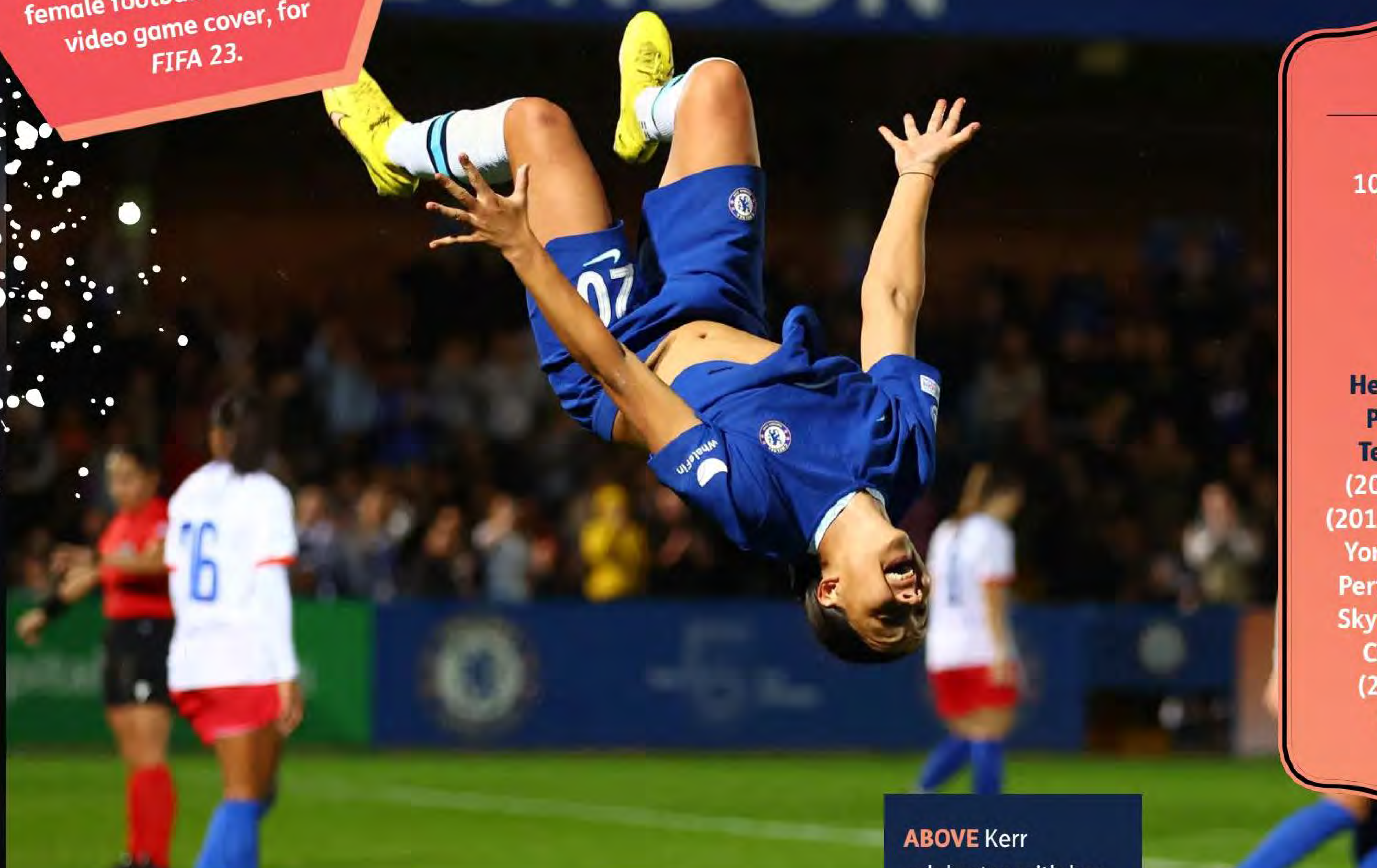
One of Chelsea's most important players – and a big reason for their dominance of the Women's Super League – Kerr is unmissable, turning any game into her own stage. The forward has become an A-lister of the WSL for her power and precision in the final third. She's able to control the ball with delicacy and bully defenders to create space – and her finishing is superb. As Australia's MVP, too, Kerr has had multiple podium appearances in the Ballon d'Or to cement her status as one of the game's greats.

KERR

SAM KERR

FUN FACT

Kerr was the first female footballer on a FIFA video game cover, for *FIFA 23*.



ABOVE Kerr celebrates with her trademark acrobatics, following a goal against FK Vllaznia in the Champions League

BIO

Date of birth: 10 September 1993
Birthplace: East Fremantle, Australia
Nationality: Australian
Height: 1.67m (5'6")
Position: Forward
Teams: Perth Glory (2008-11), Sydney FC (2012-14), Western New York Flash (2013-14), Perth Glory (2014-19), Sky Blue FC (2015-17), Chicago Red Stars (2018-19), Chelsea (2019-present)
Number: 20

A NATIONAL STRIKE

With the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand in 2023, the host's biggest superstar began the tournament injured. Kerr faced a race to get fit to feature – but when she did, she took the tournament by storm, scoring a stunner against England in the semi-finals and earning a Puskas Award nomination. Australia may have lost but the goal ignited an interest in 'soccer' in the country like never before.



MAJOR HONOURS

- **5x** Women's Super League
- **1x** Women's Asian Cup
- **3x** FA Cup
- **1x** W-League

STATS & RECORDS

69 – most goals scored for Australia

77 – second leading scorer in the NWSL

4 – joint most goals in a Women's World Cup game

Images Getty

NEYMAR

Dazzling, divisive and downright brilliant, Brazil's all-time leading scorer has delivered plenty of unforgettable moments on and off the pitch

Everyone has an opinion on Neymar. A forward who delights and infuriates in equal measure, he's either viewed as one of the most skilful and successful footballers of the century or an overrated luxury player who never lived up to the hype. But can an outrageously talented winger who broke Pelé's scoring record for Brazil, formed part of the deadliest front line in history at Barcelona and won titles across two continents really be overrated?

From his days as a prodigy at Santos to his breakthrough with the national team and his massively successful spell at Barça, Neymar made the sublime look easy, mixing astounding individual skill with crucial contributions to his teams. PSG broke the world transfer record to sign him for a reason, and perhaps the greatest disappointment is that he hasn't played more, as repeated fouls and injuries have taken their toll later in his career.



A RECORD-BREAKING MOVE

It was the transfer that rocked the world. In August 2017 Barcelona announced that Neymar's release clause – set at a comically high €222 million – had been paid by Paris Saint-Germain. The star, who many had assumed would stay at Barça for the rest of his career, was off to France. It remains by a distance the most expensive transfer of all time, a benchmark that seems unlikely to be beaten.

NEYMAR

NEYMAR

FUN FACT

Neymar has appeared in multiple (non-football) video games, including *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*.

BIO

Date of birth: 5 February 1992
Birthplace: Mogi das Cruzes, Brazil
Nationality: Brazilian
Height: 1.75m (5'9")
Position: Forward
Teams: Santos (2009-13), Barcelona (2013-17), Paris Saint-Germain (2017-23), Al-Hilal (2023-present)
Number: 10

"FROM HIS DAYS AS A PRODIGY AT SANTOS TO HIS BREAKTHROUGH WITH THE NATIONAL TEAM AND HIS MASSIVELY SUCCESSFUL SPELL AT BARÇA, NEYMAR MADE THE SUBLIME LOOK EASY"

MAJOR HONOURS

1x Copa Libertadores

3x Copa del Rey

3x Coupe de France

1x UEFA Champions League

2x La Liga

5x Ligue 1

Right Neymar represented Brazil at three FIFA World Cups, but the Seleção were eliminated in each of them

STATS & RECORDS

79 – most goals ever for the Brazil men's national team

€222 MILLION – most expensive transfer fee of all time

1.14 – goals and assists per game in the 2015-16 season

Images Getty

FUN FACT
Kane's 14 North London derby goals are more than any other player in the Premier League era.

HARRY KANE

England and Tottenham's greatest-ever goalscorer continues to break records at home and overseas

It can be easy to take Harry Kane for granted because he's simply been so consistently great for so long. But take a step back and consider his achievements and it's difficult not to be in awe. Ten straight seasons with a minimum of 24 goals. Three Premier League Golden Boots. More PL goals than anyone bar Alan Shearer, scored at a faster rate than anyone except Thierry Henry – and, with apologies to Spurs, while never playing for one of Europe's elite clubs. Focusing solely on goals does Kane a disservice, too. His link play is sublime, his passing range exceptional and he's amassed more than a century of assists over the course of his career. The one thing missing? A long-awaited major trophy. Whether it's with Bayern or England, there's no doubting that a player with Kane's individual achievements deserves to finally win some silverware.

"HIS LINK PLAY IS SUBLIME, HIS PASSING RANGE EXCEPTIONAL AND HE'S AMASSED MORE THAN A CENTURY OF ASSISTS OVER THE COURSE OF HIS CAREER"



BIO

Date of birth: 28 July 1993
Birthplace: Walthamstow, England
Nationality: English
Height: 1.88m (6'2")
Position: Forward
Teams: Tottenham Hotspur (2009-23), Bayern Munich (2023-present)
Number: 9



MAJOR HONOURS

N/A



STATS & RECORDS

280 – Spurs' all-time top goalscorer

0.67 – goals per Premier League game

17 – career hat-tricks scored so far



Right Bayern made Kane the most expensive player in Bundesliga history when they signed him for a whopping €100m in 2023

Images Getty

A BELATED BREAKTHROUGH

Despite making his debut in 2011, Kane had to wait more than three years before finally establishing himself with Tottenham. Loan spells in the Championship and League One were modestly successful, but it wasn't until the arrival of Mauricio Pochettino in 2014 that he was given a run in the Spurs team. That season Kane went on to score 31 goals in total, netting the PFA Young Player of the Year award in the process.

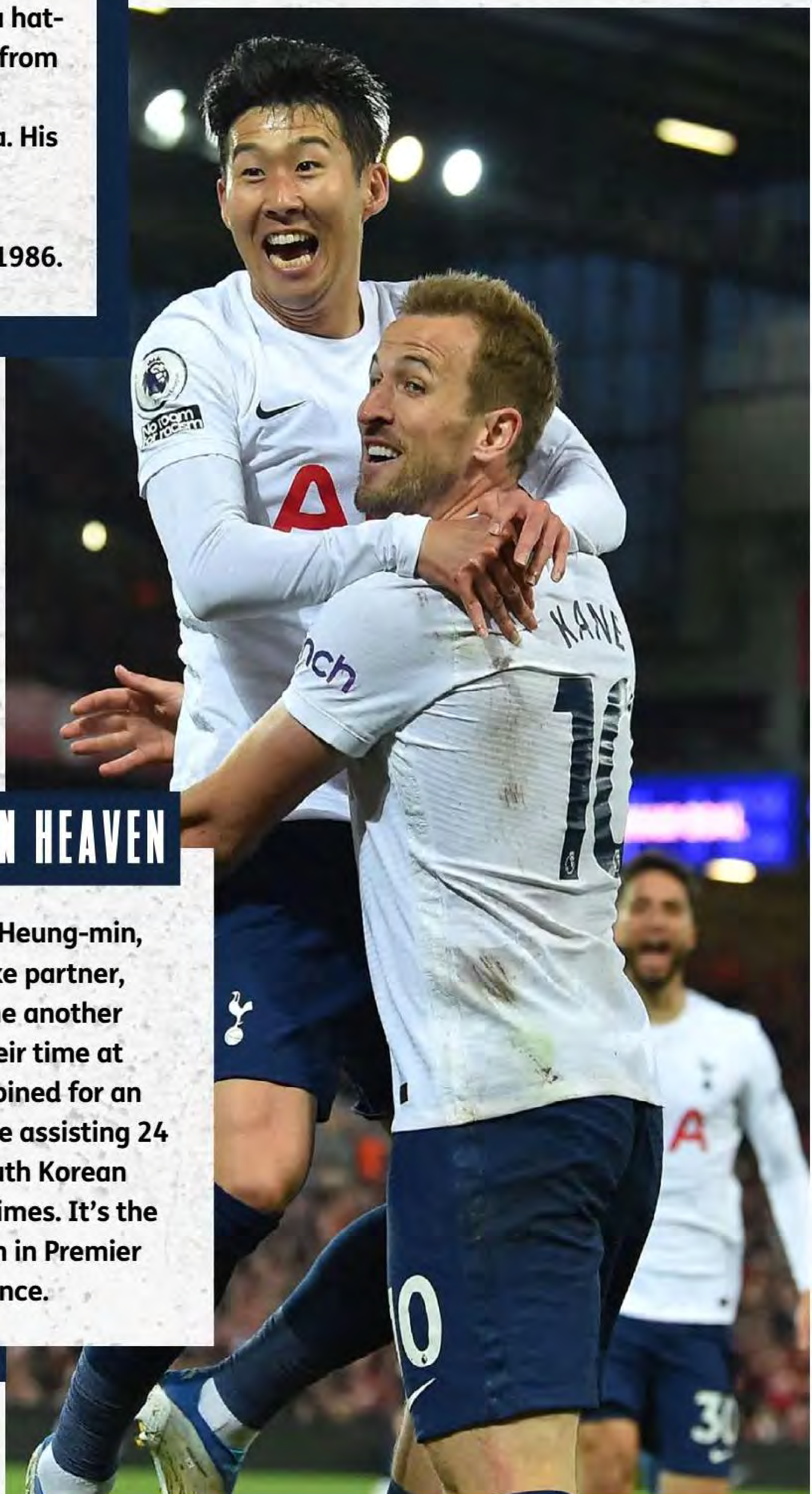


GOLDEN BOOT GLORY

Kane led the line for England at the 2018 World Cup and was named captain by Gareth Southgate. He repaid his manager's faith, netting five times during the group stage, including a hat-trick against Panama, and scoring from the spot in normal time and the penalty shootout against Colombia. His six goals made him the first Englishman to win the World Cup Golden Boot since Gary Lineker in 1986.

FUN FACT

Kane was released by several youth academies before eventually joining Spurs – including Arsenal's.



A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

In fellow Spurs hero Son Heung-min, Kane found his ideal strike partner, with the pair assisting one another over the years. During their time at Tottenham, the two combined for an incredible 47 goals – Kane assisting 24 goals for Son and the South Korean returning the favour 23 times. It's the most prolific combination in Premier League history by a distance.



FUN FACT

Kane is a keen American football fan and has said he would like to become an NFL kicker.

AN ENGLISHMAN ABROAD

There was shock at Kane's move to Bayern Munich in 2023. Sadness, as well, from Spurs fans. But also excitement to see how England's captain and a Premier League legend would take to German football. The answer? Better than even Kane would have hoped. An astonishing 18 goals in his first 12 league appearances instantly endeared him to the Bayern faithful, and the records continued to tumble throughout a sensational debut season. He finished with 36 Bundesliga goals, winning his first European Golden Shoe.

Images Getty

ANDRÉS INIESTA

A midfield magician who stood out for his skill with the ball – even on one of the greatest teams of the century

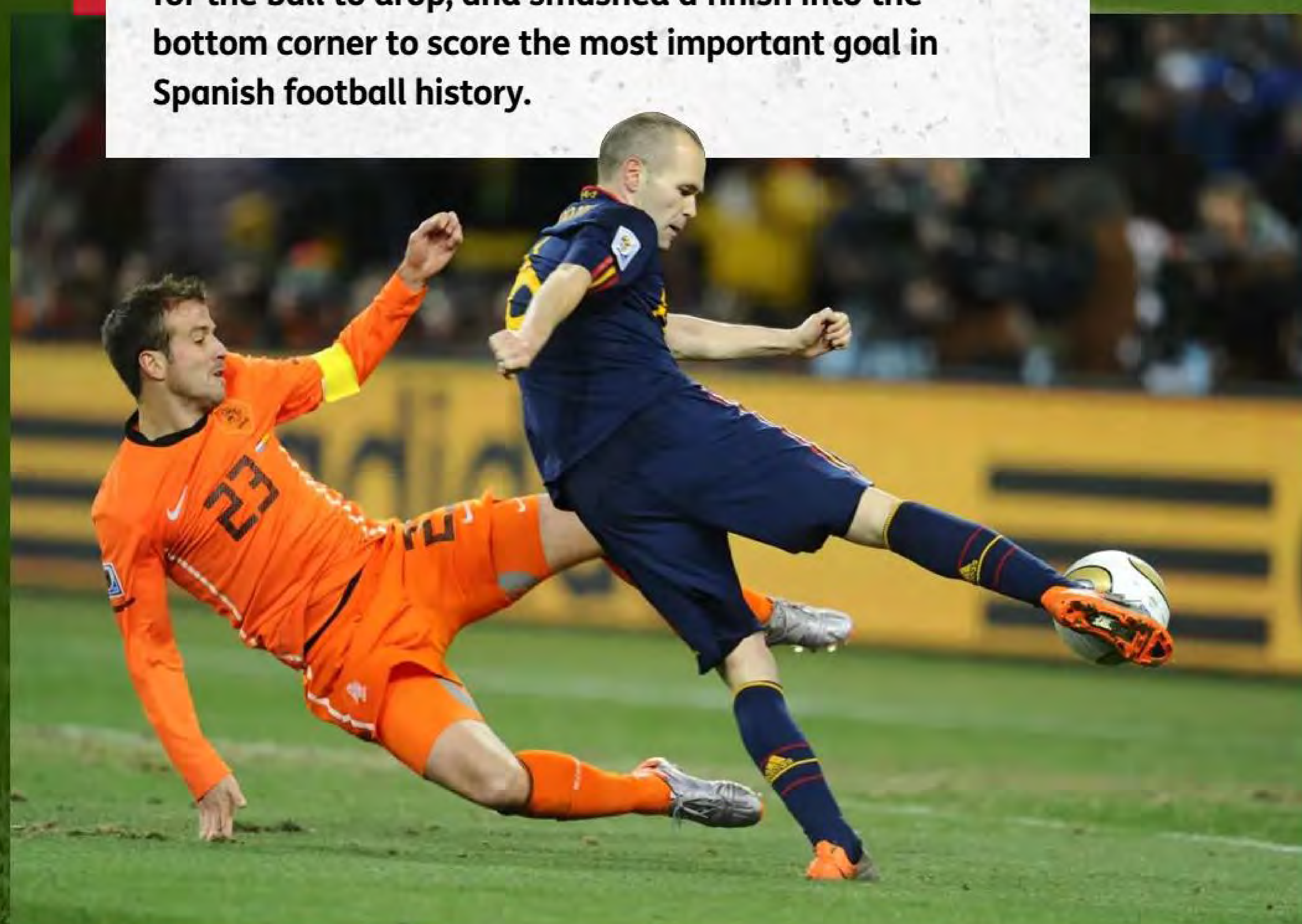
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While watching a teenaged Andrés Iniesta play in a preseason youth tournament, Pep Guardiola – in the final years of his playing career – turned to another prodigious young teammate, Xavi, and reportedly said: "You will retire me, but this kid will retire us both". As it happened, all three would thrive together. Iniesta established himself in the senior Barça side and displayed all of the most famous attributes of a La Masia graduate: slightly built but blessed with supreme ball control, and the ability to move serenely through the most congested and aggressive of spaces on the pitch.

Alongside Xavi and Sergio Busquets, he formed the most complete midfield of the 21st century for both Barcelona and Spain, and while he was never prolific in front of goal, Iniesta had the knack for scoring at key moments in the most important matches. Like, for instance, extra time in the World Cup final with the scores level...

EXTRA TIME IN SOCCER CITY

The 2010 World Cup final in Johannesburg looked certain to go to penalties. Both Spain and the Netherlands had threatened intermittently through 116 minutes of tense duels, but nerves, fatigue and the South African heat were taking their toll. Until Cesc Fàbregas released Iniesta, who took one touch, waited for the ball to drop, and smashed a finish into the bottom corner to score the most important goal in Spanish football history.



INIESTA

ANDRÉS INIESTA



BIO

Date of birth: 11 May 1984
Birthplace: Fuentealbilla, Spain
Nationality: Spanish
Height: 1.72m (5'8")
Position: Midfielder
Teams: Barcelona (2002-18), Vissel Kobe (2018-23), Emirates (2023-present)
Number: 8



MAJOR HONOURS

9x La Liga
6x Copa del Rey
4x UEFA Champions League
2x UEFA European Championship
1x FIFA World Cup



STATS & RECORDS

51 GAMES – longest individual unbeaten run in La Liga

674 – appearances for Barça, fourth on the all-time list

0.29 – goals and assists per game for Barça

FUN FACT

Iniesta and Xavi swapped squad numbers for Spain, to give each other a chance to wear them.

Images Getty

GIANLUIGI BUFFON

Italy's eternal numero uno went from wunderkind to elder statesman in an elite career that spanned decades



Sustained greatness is the most difficult achievement in football. Most players, even the greats, manage just a few seasons at the pinnacle of the game – and that also applies to goalkeepers, whose careers often extend beyond their outfield teammates. Take any five-year period of Gianluigi Buffon's career – the teenaged prodigy at Parma; the World Cup winner with Italy; the bedrock of a decade of Juventus dominance – and you have a world-class player. Combine them all across a 28-year stretch and you have the stuff of legend.

Buffon's longevity at the highest level is unmatched, but his ability is perhaps easier to overlook. He supplemented his imposing frame with remarkably quick reflexes and an aggressive approach that would set the standard for future generations of goalkeepers, and in the later phases of his career, he improved his positioning and reading of the game dramatically. Bravo, Gigi.

NONE SHALL PASS

If there is one mark against Buffon, it's his unfortunate record in finals. But in the most important game of his career, the 2006 World Cup final, he was immaculate. Italy's heroic keeper didn't concede a single goal in open play throughout the tournament, and made several spectacular saves – notably from Lukas Podolski in the semi-final and Zinedine Zidane late in the final – as the Azzurri secured an improbable victory over France.



FUN FACT

Buffon's mighty 176 appearances playing for Italy is more than any other player.

BUFFON

GIANLUIGI BUFFON



BIO

Date of birth: 28 January 1978
Birthplace: Carrara, Italy
Nationality: Italian
Height: 1.92m (6'4")
Position: Goalkeeper
Teams: Parma (1995-2001), Juventus (2001-18), Paris Saint-Germain (2018-19), Juventus (2019-21), Parma (2021-23)
Number: 1



MAJOR HONOURS

1x FIFA World Cup
1x UEFA Cup
10x Serie A
1x Ligue 1
6x Coppa Italia



STATS & RECORDS

657 – most Serie A appearances

61,412 – most minutes played for Juventus

501 – most career clean sheets

Images Getty

FOOTBALL ALL-STARS

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